

Gratitude and Happiness

Close to 25 years ago, in response to the critique that psychology focused too much on disorders and diagnoses, Dr. Martin Seligman began to develop the field of positive psychology. The goal was to reinvigorate the field by focusing on strategies that would help people flourish. One of the basic tenets of the theory is that if we actively cultivate our character strengths and virtues, we will be happier and have increased well-being. Dr. Seligman and colleagues identified twenty-four character strengths and conducted research to better determine the details and nuances of how they can be developed. Of the twenty-four strengths, gratitude has been the most consistently and robustly associated with happiness and the life well lived. Consequently, cultivating the trait of gratitude became one of the key interventions to increase happiness.

Gratitude permeates all areas of Jewish life and serves as the basis of

many prayers, commandments, and holidays. Chanukah serves as a perfect illustrative paradigm. In formulating the essential elements of the holiday, the Talmud (*Shabbat* 21b) states that they are days of “*hallel ve-hoda’a*” – “singing praise and giving thanks.” Rashi comments that giving thanks refers to the fact that we recite “*Al Hanissim*.” We articulate our gratitude for the miracles of the holiday in the context of the blessings of gratitude that we recite every day. Yet, when codifying this idea in his *Mishneh Torah* (*Megillah ve-Chanukah* 3:3), instead of writing that these are days of praise and gratitude, Maimonides writes that they are days of “*simcha ve-hallel*” – “happiness and praise.” Why replace the word gratitude for happiness? Perhaps Maimonides is alluding to the fact that gratitude and happiness are integrally related. By expressing our gratitude, we are at the same time experiencing happiness.

The act of lighting the Menorah is also a symbolic expression of gratitude. Addressing the juxtaposition of



Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman

Assistant Professor, Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education & Administration and Assistant Rabbi, Kingsway Jewish Center

the commandment of lighting the Menorah in the Tabernacle and the story of how the leaders of the tribes dedicated materials to the Tabernacle, Rashi (*Numbers* 8:1) suggests that the former is a response to the latter. Aaron was disappointed that unlike the other leaders who were given the opportunity to actively participate, he and his tribe did not donate to the cause. God comforts Aaron by informing him that he will have the privilege of kindling the Menorah.

Knowing that there were several special services that Aaron and the priests were responsible for in the Tabernacle, Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz wonders why the Menorah is singled out as compensating for the lack of donations. Rabbi Shmuelevitz suggests that the Menorah is chosen specifically because it highlights the essential concept of gratitude. A midrash (*Bemidbar Rabbah* 15:5)

asks, if God is symbolically the light of the world, what significance is there in mankind kindling a light in front of Him? The midrash suggests that while God doesn't need light, He nevertheless asks the Jewish people to light the Menorah in order to provide us the opportunity to express our gratitude to Him. According to the midrash, the act of lighting the Menorah is inherently an expression of gratitude to God.

When we light the menorah this Chanukah and we celebrate and praise God, let us be mindful of the message of gratitude. Let us be thankful for the miracles that took place *bayamim haheim* – in those days – and the ones that take place *bazman hazeh* – in our days. By feeling and expressing this gratitude, may we merit lives infused with meaning and happiness.



RIETS PRESS
PILLARS SOCIETY

Help RIETS Press publish the Torah of our Yeshiva! Become a RIETS Press Pillars Society Member!

RIETS Press Trustee

- Name listed among trustees in all future RIETS Press publications for the duration of your membership in the society.
- Complimentary collection of full RIETS Press library and copies of all future RIETS Press publications for the duration of your membership in the society.
- Receive an annual RIETS Press gift package.
- Access to exclusive events with RIETS Roshei Yeshiva and RIETS Press authors

RIETS Press Supporter

- Name listed among pillars in all future RIETS Press publications for the duration of your membership in the society.
- Complimentary collection of full RIETS Press library and copies of all future RIETS Press publications for the duration of your membership in the society.
- Receive an annual RIETS Press gift package.

RIETS Press Friend

- Name listed among supporters in all future RIETS Press publications for the duration of your membership in the society.
- Complimentary collection of full RIETS Press library and copies of all future RIETS Press publications for the duration of your membership in the society.

Scan the QR code
below to learn more



To learn more, visit us online at yu.edu/rietspresspillars