

Rosh Hashanah 5782

Gratitude in the Face of Loss and Challenge

Shana Tovah

Due to social distancing, a Shakespearean Theatre Company had to cancel all of their live shows for Covid-19. Before self-quarantining, they decided to do one last performance of Romeo and Juliet and livestream their production over the internet. Before the show, they had the costumes, props, and the theatre disinfected to protect the health of the actors. However, the sanitizing process left the stage dangerously slippery. Because of the shortage of household supplies, the maintenance team had no paper towels to wipe away the disinfectant, and they almost had to cancel the show. Luckily a stagehand had an idea. He found an old dictionary in the props closet, ripped out its pages, and laid them all down individually to cover the entire stage. This gave the actors just enough traction to safely perform. The play was streamed to over 50,000 viewers and went off without a hitch. The next day the producer tracked the stagehand. "I owe you a debt of gratitude! Your idea saved the day! Everybody is raving about how much they enjoyed the show!" The stagehand nodded and said, "I'm not surprised. People love and are very grateful for a good play on words."

There was so much lost during the last 16 months. Millions of people died from Covid-19. Hundreds of millions have been made sick. Some of us lost family and/or friends. Many people lost jobs or work opportunities. Economies have been upended, with the poorest of people who were just getting by now unable to afford food. Many of us had lifecycle events disrupted or canceled. And at the very best all our plans were ruined, and we had no or limited social contact for months. Many of us may still find ourselves in the same position as we were last year because of our fears of variants. Synagogue life has not been the same since March of 2020. I

know that I have thought to myself often and prayed that this should all end now and our new normal should suddenly be our old normal. I just want to go out and live life again without worrying will this decision make me or others sick. Could this haircut kill me? But I know that there is no immediate cure to our current situation. Life is going to continue to be limited, difficult, and challenging for some time to come. Like this time last year we hardly know what tomorrow will bring. Yet, in the face of all these challenges and disappointments we have no choice but to be grateful for what we do have as individuals and as a community. We have lost so much. But through our gratitude we will maintain our humanity and dignity despite our losses.

This past year I had a mini-sabbatical in which my family and I were supposed to spend three and a half months in Jerusalem. We had some exciting plans. And then everything changed. It became clear that we were not going to leave the country or even the province. So we went to Salt Spring Island instead of Jerusalem. While Salt Spring Island and Jerusalem are not the same, my family and I were grateful for our blessings. We were grateful for the wonderful bonding time that we had and the fact I could study with Jewish scholars all around the world via zoom. I also had time to study Torah with Naomi and Talmud with Avishai and Yair. Our Shabbat meals with family, our hikes and our hours playing board games together gave us such pleasure. We were so grateful for these moments knowing how much suffering there was in the world. We are also so grateful to be part of the Vancouver Jewish community and Beth Israel family which has weathered this storm and challenging time. I plan to speak more about that on Kol Nidrei. For me the concept of gratitude and Beth Israel go hand in hand, especially this year.

In order to emerge healthily from the pandemic we must have gratitude against the backdrop of loss and challenge. The word gratitude first entered the English language in the 16th century from medieval Latin. It comes from thankful and is related to favour and pleasing. The

English word of grateful hints at the fact that gratitude is the direct result of recognizing the good in one's life. That leads us naturally to the Hebrew for gratitude. We translate the word gratitude in Hebrew to Hakarat Ha Tov which means the recognition of good. There is something very profound about Hakarat Hatov. It is not enough to just feel thankful for what we have. We must actively recognize it and announce it.

We all need a spiritual purpose in our lives. We all need meaning greater than ourselves. The most important place to create a spiritual grounding is with gratitude to God. Since the beginning of Covid-19 Beth Israel formed a daily study group online studying Musar texts. Musar is the school of Jewish ethical teachings. I have been grateful for the new wisdom I have learned and for the many students who have joined us. Rabbi Moshe Chayim Luzatto wrote in his Musar text Mesillat Yesharim that we studied:

We must look into the many benefits that the Holy One does with a person at all moments and times and the great wonders God performs for the person from the time of birth until death. For the more one looks into and contemplates these things, the more the person will recognize an enormous debt to God ,Who bestows good to that person....

The Mishna teaches. “היה רבי מאיר אומר חייב אדם לברך מאה ברכות בכל יום” “Rabbi Meir would say: A person is obligated to recite one hundred blessings every day.” It is said that Rabbi Meir experienced many miracles, which may be why he taught this. But we all have experienced many miracles. Each day that we wake up and each day that we are here to experience joy and the beauty of life is a miracle. Each of our hundred daily blessings remind us to be grateful for that fact. By verbalizing our gratitude we recognize those miracles and become more human.

People often wonder what is the point of prayer and blessings when it seems as though God is not listening. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said the point of prayer is not to be saved,

but to be worthy of being saved. Similarly, and maybe even Heschel's inspiration was Soren Kierkegaard who said that the function of prayer is not to influence God, but rather to change the nature of the one who prays. Prayer and the blessings may not influence God. But blessings will move us closer to God through inspiring us to feel Hakarat Ha Tov, in recognition of our everyday miracles. That will make us better and happier people.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel also wrote, "Among the many things religious tradition holds in store for us is a legacy of wonder. The surest way to suppress our ability to understand the meaning of God and the importance of worship is to take things for granted..." When we do not wonder about the miracles of this world we fail to feel or show a spiritual Hakarat Ha Tov.

We must also show our gratitude for what others do for us. In Talmud Berakhot it teaches, "Ben Zoma would say: A good guest says: How much effort did the host expend on my behalf? How much meat did the host bring me? How much wine did the host bring me. How many loaves did the host give me. All the effort expended, was only for me." Hakarat Ha tov for other people goes far beyond friends. According to the rabbis it is at the heart of the mitzvah of Kibud Av V'em, honouring one's parents. In the Book Sefer Ha Chinuch which delineates and explains the mitzvot it says, "At the root of Kibud Av VeEm lies the thought that it is fitting for a person to acknowledge and treat with loving-kindness the person who treated them with goodness. A person should realize that parents brought them into the world.. and give them every honour.."

In order to feel Hakarat Ha tov, we must also feel and acknowledge Hakarat Ha ra. We must recognize the bad in the world. It will naturally enhance our gratitude. When everything is fine we often forget about our blessings. How many of us ponder a part of the body when it does not hurt? A pain free back is a forgotten back. But for anyone who throws out their back and then

feels better a week later there is recognition of the painless back. That naturally leads to extra appreciation of health. In this time of great worldwide suffering we must recognize the bad. With so much illness, death, and financial struggle do to Covid-19 the world seems much worse today than 2 years ago. As I read the news and see how the pandemic has crushed so many people's dreams and lives, I see their challenges and appreciate my own blessings. We must empathize with other people's pain and then we will truly feel our Hakarat Ha tov, our own gratitude.

By recognizing the bad in the world we really do realize how good we have it. Messilat Yescharim also taught, "A rich and healthy person is.. indebted to God, for the wealth and health. The poor person is indebted to God...for sustenance through miracles and wonders, not leaving the person to die of hunger. The sick person [is indebted] for strength despite the illness or injuries.." For Luzzato, even a person with struggles realizes that there are others who are far worse. None of us have perfect lives, not even our perfect friends or perfect neighbours.

There are many reasons for us to show our gratitude, both selfless and selfish. When we express our gratitude to others for what they have done for us, it is going to make them feel good. But we also grow as human beings. The author of a well-known book on gratitude, Sarah Brethnach wrote, "Whatever we are waiting for, peace of mind, contentment, grace.. will surely come to us, but only when we are ready to receive it with an open and grateful heart." The emphasis is on grateful in this quote. The great German theologian, Minister Dietrich Bonhoeffer who gave his life fighting the Nazis stated, "In ordinary life we hardly realize that we receive a great deal more than we give, and that it is only with gratitude that life becomes rich."

When we recognize our own blessing, we will also bless others. In Mishna Pirkei Avot we learn Mitzvah Garreret Mitzva. The performance of one commandment leads to another.

When that mitzvah is ben Adam l'chavero, between human beings, it bound to have a positive affect on others. Our gratitude can be a force for good for others.

I want to encourage you all to talk about with your friends and family at today's lunch:

1. Hakarat Hara - What were your challenges over the last year?
2. Hakarat Ha Tov- What were your blessings and reasons for being grateful?

Rosh Hashana, the first day of the year in what is hopefully the end of the pandemic is a perfect time to take account of challenges and blessings in our lives. The first chief Ashkanazi rabbi of Israel, Abraham Kook taught "When the existence of gratitude and recognition of the good becomes lacking from existence, the spirit of humankind is left without sparkle or shine.

Therefore it is impossible for existence not to include this perfection (of gratitude.)

Gratitude is what makes us human and gives us the shine in a day. There is a Kabbalistic idea that every human has a spark of God. That spark is made even brighter as we bring more gratitude into our lives. As we bring more light into our souls we illuminate more of the world. Every Shabbat we include a prayer known as Nishmat in which we say to God, "Were our mouth as full of song as the sea, and our lips as full of joyous praise as the breadth of the heavens, we still could not thank You sufficiently, God, for even one of the thousands of thousands and myriad of myriads of favours that you perform for us." May we all express such gratitude each day. Through our Hakarat Ha Tov, we will certainly all become more Tov, better people.

Shana Tova