

Gratitude

(Sermon Draft written as speaking notes delivered by Rabbi Michael Schwab on the occasion of his son becoming Bar Mitzvah 12/14/19)

“How strange we are in the world, and how presumptuous our doings! Only **one** response can maintain us, **gratefulness**: **gratefulness** for witnessing the wonder, for the gift of our unearned right to serve, to adore, and to fulfill. It is **gratefulness** which makes the soul great.” These words were spoken by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the most influential Jewish theologians, teachers and activists of the 20th century. And he believed that our religious tradition, Judaism, provided an uplifting path that could open up our spiritual lives to help us discover the radical amazement of our everyday existence. As he wrote, “Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement... get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes *nothing* for granted. *Everything* is phenomenal; *everything* is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed.”

This is an aspirational vision of Judaism: to harness the power of our tradition in order to infuse us with a sense of amazement about life. And how does he propose that one achieve this great state of wonder and thus such a heightened spirituality? There is only one effective way: and that is by cultivating one’s sense of **gratitude**. As the great Roman philosopher Cicero put it, “Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all others.”

What Cicero and Heschel point to is that a true sense of gratitude unleashes a whole host of incredible positive forces in life: gratitude

leads to amazement, to love, and to appreciation, as well as sensitizes us to the needs of others and the very presence of God. Gratitude is not merely a matter of politeness, though a polite thank you is a good start (I hope my kids are listening), rather gratitude is a powerful value and a spiritual posture.

In Judaism we have a term for the activity of cultivating gratitude. It is called *Hakarat Hatov*, literally “recognizing the good.” Cultivating gratitude involves a *proactive* accounting, or awareness, of what is good in our lives. The philosophy is that through the act of being *consciously* thankful, as much as we possibly can, we will experience a deep appreciation for what we already have. We will be less likely to succumb to jealousy or to feel bad about what we *don't* have. And we might become more sensitized to the needs and lacks of other people who may not *have* what we have.

In fact, the name *Yehudah*, or Jew in English, comes from the Hebrew root “to thank”. Thus, our very namesake as a people is literally rooted in gratitude. This notion is *so* core to Judaism that we include an opportunity for cultivating gratitude with the *Modim* blessing in each and every Amidah, one of the principal prayers of each service. We did it during Shacharit and will do it again soon during Musaf. When we recite the *Modim*, we are thanking God for the daily miracles of life that sustain us. We are attempting to raise to our consciousness the blessings in our everyday lives, and the basic blessing of life itself. This awareness actively puts us in touch with our Creator,

God, and helps us to experience the radical amazement about life that Heschel spoke about. And such a spiritual practice of gratitude provides us with the perspective we need so that even when life is difficult there is still much for which to be thankful; still much to sustain us and give us hope.

Moses was one of our tradition's greatest teachers about the centrality of gratitude and how gratitude is truly at the center of what it means to be a Jew. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks points out, you may recall that gratitude had not been the strong point of the Children of Israel in the desert. They complained about lack of food and water, about the manna and the lack of meat and vegetables, about the dangers they faced from the Egyptians, and about the inhabitants of the land they were about to enter. They were actually the models of *ingratitude* during those turbulent desert years.

But notably, and perhaps more relevant to us, Moses felt a greater danger still, would be a lack of gratitude during good times, once we were settled in the land and were more secure. This is what he warned in the Torah: (quote) “When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, do **not** exalt yourself, *forgetting* the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery ... Do **not** say to yourself, ‘**My** power and the might of my own hand have gained me this wealth.’ (end quote). Moses warns that the worst thing

that could happen to them would be to forget *how* they came to the land, that God had promised it to their ancestors and had taken them from slavery to freedom, sustaining them during the forty years in the wilderness through the daily miracles of manna and a traveling well. The worst thing that could happen to them at this stage would be to forget to be grateful.

Sacks believes that this type of institutional gratitude was a revolutionary idea: that “as a nation, Israel should never attribute its achievements to itself but should always ascribe its victories, indeed its very existence, to something higher than itself: to God”. Such a religious practice of *ultimate* gratitude leads to modesty, wisdom and compassion, rather than arrogance, greed and selfishness. And of course such a perspective raises to our awareness the spiritual and the presence of God. All of which makes us better and healthier human beings.

Did Moses perhaps know what scientists tell us today? That, as Sacks relates, gratitude improves physical health and immunity against disease. That grateful people are more likely to exercise regularly. That thankfulness reduces toxic emotions such as resentment, frustration and regret and makes depression less likely. That it helps people avoid over-reacting to negative experiences. And that gratitude even tends to make people sleep better. Research concludes that it enhances self-respect, making it less likely that you will envy others. And grateful people tend to have better relationships. Reliably saying “thank you” when others help you measurably enhances friendships and elicits better performance

from employees. And gratitude is also a major factor in strengthening resilience.

And therefore it is no surprise that gratitude is not only featured in every Amidah but it is also the subject of the very first prayer our lips are supposed to utter as soon as we wake in the morning: *Modeh ani lifanecha melech chai vikayam, she-hechezartah bi nishmati, B'hemla rabbah emunatecha*, I am **grateful** to you, living and enduring Sovereign, for restoring to me my soul-your great faith in me is beyond measure". And this fundamental theme of gratitude is carried through the whole first section of prayer in the morning called *Birchot Hashachar*, when we recite a litany of thanksgiving prayers for life itself: for the human body, the physical world, land to stand on and eyes to see with. According to Judaism we are to begin each and every day by cultivating gratitude.

And though you don't have to be religious to be grateful, as Sacks notes, there is something about a belief in God as creator of the universe, shaper of history and author of the laws of life, that directs and facilitates our gratitude. It is hard to feel grateful to a universe that came into existence for no reason and is blind to us and to our fate. It is precisely our faith in a personal God that gives force and focus to our thanks.

Think about the Sh'ma, which models the ideal of love. The text teaches us that we should love God "*b'chol levavcha*, with all of our heart". And what allows us to love so completely? As the second and

third paragraphs of the Shema make clear, it is indeed gratitude. We recognize that God is the creator of the universe who gives us land, rain and food and who heard our cries in Egypt and redeemed us. In recognizing these great acts of compassion and through valuing God's care, we are able to love God more fully.

My colleague Rabbi Steven Kane shared a story with me that when the great Rabbi Simon Greenberg turned 90 he was honored by his colleagues. That day he said the following: "People ask me how I have managed to reach this age, and I tell them, in all honesty I have no idea...But I *can* tell you something about how I have lived. Long ago I decided that I would live my life by the faith in the concept that God made this world, and that God made many good things in this world, and therefore it was my duty to be grateful for these things and to **express** my appreciation for them. And so, whenever I have tasted a delicious morsel of food or whenever I have seen a beautiful thing in nature, or whenever I have had joy from my children or success in one of my ventures, I have always tried to say thank you to God for this blessing."

Jewish tradition, through prayer, blessings and wonderful interpretations of text echo Rabbi Greenberg's example: that a foundational element of living a spiritual and happy life is indeed gratitude. With that wisdom in mind I want to propose another idea to supplement the great practices offered through Jewish ritual and prayer that I discovered recently from Rabbi Kane, which might add to

the *personal* nature of our ability to cultivate gratitude: the creation of a “gratitude journal”. Each evening, before you go to sleep, I invite you to write in a journal **one** thing that happened to you that day that you are grateful for, that expresses your own joy at being alive in this world. Just **one** thing is enough. As Kane points out, it might be a random act of kindness that someone did for you, or the kiss of your spouse as they left for the day. It might be something memorable your children did, or a bit of wisdom from your parents. It could be as seemingly small as the courteous way the person treated you at the checkout line or the person who let your car into the lane of traffic. Or it might be as lofty as the act of a doctor who operated on you and added years to your life or the dedication of a loved one who supported you in a way that was meaningful beyond words. And then I invite you to inscribe on the last page of the journal the *modeh ani* prayer-that one sentence long prayer that expresses gratitude and which we say each morning. So when you get up, review what you have written the night or nights before, and then recite that one line prayer of thanks. See how this act of conscious gratitude changes your day. See what this practice might lead to. See if this helps cultivate the gratitude that our tradition teaches us could be such a powerful force in our lives.

I want to end my teaching with the Shemah prayer again and a great insight of the Kotsker Rebbe. In the shemah we recite “*V’hayu hadevarim ha-eileh asher anochi m’tzavcha hayom al levavcha*, and these words which I command you this day should be upon your

heart”. The Kotsker wondered, why does it say that these words should be “**upon** your heart”? Shouldn’t it rather say that God’s words should be “**in** your heart”? The answer, he taught, was that each of us have impediments that stand in the way of our realizing God’s words. Sometimes our hearts are open to God and to gratitude, and sometimes they are not. When they are open, God’s words reach our heart, but when they are not, he teaches here that it is enough to simply put them “*al levavecha*, **upon** your heart”, where they will rest, waiting for the moment when our hearts are ready to receive this teaching.

So it is with gratitude. Some of us today are in touch with our gratitude, for whatever reason -- it is **in** our hearts. Yet there are others of us who, for the moment, may only be able to place our gratefulness “upon our hearts”. But that is OK, because as long as we express our gratitude regularly, it is like filling a well of thanks that will be there in a future moment when our hearts **will** be open and we will then be able to place them fully “within”, and the gratitude we cultivated will be felt and received.

For me today, is one of those days of full gratitude, a day that my heart is **wide** open with thanks and appreciation. Appreciation for living at a time and in a place where Jewish life thrives and the amazing community that is called North Suburban Synagogue Beth El could exist. A community that is warm, vibrant and inclusive. A community that wears its Jewish values on its sleeve and supports its members through their Jewish journeys as well as through the roller coaster of

life's vast experiences. Like today, for my family. I look around and my cup runneth over, in appreciation for your love and your presence. Our joy is increased because we get to share it with loving community members, precious friends and beloved family.

And my sense of gratitude is so deep in particular for my family. My amazing children, Ari (about whom I will say more shortly), Liana, Noa and Miri. And my incredible wife and life partner, Erica, who is a walking miracle. And to both of our sets of parents who support us, always, as well as our incredible siblings with whom we are blessed to be close. And to the larger family village of aunts, uncles and thank God, so many cousins - we are so grateful for you!!

Ari, please join me. I remember your bris -- thankfully you don't. Actually it was a beautiful moment right here on this bimah. Many of the people here now were there then as well. I was so choked up during my speech I had trouble getting the words out and tears of joy were literally filling my eyes. And here I am with you now, 13 years later: you are a full-blown young man with a driving intellect, a great sense of humor, and a compassionate heart. You love family, you love your friends, you love thrilling and adventurous sports on every surface: trampoline, snowy mountain or any kind of water; you love animals, you love reading and you deeply value what it means to be a Jew. I was so proud of the way you embraced your studies this year, learning both weekday and

Shabbat davening, Hallel, the Rosh Hodesh Torah reading for your Israel Bar Mitzvah, this Torah reading, Haftarah and writing two *Divrei Torah*. In fact, discussing the ideas in your Torah portion with you and learning from and with you was one of the highlights of these last 6 months for me. You showed me a depth and maturity that amazed me. I absolutely love spending time with you and perhaps more importantly I am so proud of the person you are, and are still becoming. Who you are and the fact that you are my son fills me with gratitude in a way that you might have trouble fully understanding at this stage of your life. Just know that the feeling I am experiencing right now as your father is a truly wonderful feeling that I will remember always.

But as I put my rabbi hat back on, I want to tell you that the *whole community* is proud of you today for what you have accomplished and all that you have learned. You have put in so much time and effort to cultivating your Jewish identity. And we all eagerly anticipate the great contributions to the world you will surely make. You spent a significant amount of time on your Hesed project for your Bar Mitzvah, raising a substantial amount of money, creating awareness and giving of your time in dedication to your passion for the Israel Guide Dog Center. This is in addition to the volunteer work we do as a family and what you do at Schechter. You have dedicated so much time to learning about your Judaism here, at Schechter and at Ramah and we couldn't be

prouder. We are so blessed that you have become a full member of this congregation and it fills us with hope that you represent the future of the Jewish people. I love you and am so proud. So in celebration of this wonderful day we have some gifts for you. . . .