

Shabbat Toldot 5786 - Gratitude: A Perfect Practice in an Imperfect World  
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Shabbat Shalom.

There is a story told about Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, founder of the Mussar movement, who lived during a difficult period in 19th-century Lithuania.

One bitter winter night, Rabbi Salanter was walking home through the narrow streets of Vilna. As he passed by a small workshop, he noticed a faint light flickering through the window.

Curious—because it was far past closing time—Rabbi Salanter stepped inside.

There, in the cold, dimly lit room, sat an elderly shoemaker. His back was bent, his hands were stiff, and the candle he worked by was nearly burned down to the end of the wick.

The rabbi asked, “Why are you still working so late? The candle is almost gone.”

The shoemaker looked up and smiled softly.

He said, “Rabbi, as long as the candle is still burning, there is still time to fix the shoes.”

Rabbi Salanter was so struck by these simple words that he repeated them to his students for years—for the shoemaker spoke about life.

The shoemaker had so much he could have complained about. So many reasons he could have called it a night: It was frigid cold. It was eerily dark. He was physically uncomfortable. The light was almost out. Yet the shoemaker instead focused on what was going *right* - the candle was still lit! Even a little light is still a light.

Today is the Shabbat before Thanksgiving. As we know, Thanksgiving is not a Jewish holiday per se. No Kiddush or lighting candles for this one. Americans of other faiths and no faith celebrate the day, gather as families, and express what they are grateful for. And yet...there is something very Jewish about Thanksgiving. For gratitude is a core religious value - in Hebrew, *Hakarat HaTov*.

These days are deeply challenging for so many Americans for so many reasons. We all face obstacles in our personal lives, within our families, within a hyper-politically divided country, and for Jews, living during a post-October 7th world of heightened antisemitism. If only our problems were as straightforward to fix as a pair of shoes. Thanksgiving is not a day when we should pretend all is perfect. Instead, it's a day to recognize that there are still many things to appreciate. It's vital to practice gratitude

*precisely* when life is not ideal. Amidst a darkening world, let's search out those candles.

The Jewish tradition values gratitude not because life has been easy for the Jewish people historically - the opposite! Indeed, to be a Jew is to be part of a grateful people. This is true historically since we have needed countless blessings in order to survive and thrive as we do today. And it's true linguistically as well. The Jews are יהודים, or those descended from the tribe of Judah, יהודה. Here's the story with our name:

In next week's Parsha, Vayetze, our matriarch Leah gives birth to her sons. Aside from the obvious physical pain, the arrival of her first children should bring joy and bliss. But that's not what Leah experiences at all. It's her sister Rachel who captures the heart of their shared husband Jacob, not Leah. This crushes her. A torrential sadness then spills out into the names of Leah's first three children. She calls her first son Reuven because "G-d has seen my affliction." Next is Shimon, for "G-d heard that I was unloved and gave me this one too." Then follows Levi, because "This time my husband will become attached to me for I have borne him three sons" (Gn. 29:32-34). How awful.

It is nothing short of shocking, then, when Leah names her fourth son Judah. She names him Yehuda as she affirms, "This time I will *thank* G-d. הפעם אודה את השם" (Gn. 29:35). From the depths of pain bursts forth this rush of gratitude.

The Rabbis ask, Why? Why does Leah thank G-d only after this fourth son of hers? What changed? The Midrash says that Leah was a prophet who could foresee that there would be 12 sons born to four women: Leah, Rachel, and their maidservants Bilhah and Zilpah. This meant that, in fairness, each mother should be allotted three. Her *fourth* son, therefore, was above and beyond, more than she deserved. His name Judah reflects a deep awareness: she had received more than she ever imagined. Alternatively, maybe she noted for the first time what she *had*, instead of what she *lacked*.

Leah acknowledges this unexpected blessing with gratitude. "This time I will *thank* G-d. הפעם אודה את השם." *Odeh* has the same root as *Modeh Ani*, I am grateful. As *Todah Rabbah*, thank you. As *Modim Anachnu Lach*, we are grateful to You. As *Yehudi*, Jew.

The Hasidic commentary Iturei Torah says that Leah's expression of gratitude, of recognizing she had more than she deserved, is why Jews are called Yehudim. We too should aim for lives filled with praise and gratefulness, with the realization that in many ways we each have more than we deserve.

And now, back to reality. It's not easy at all to pivot to that lofty perspective. Gratitude is not merely a feeling that some people seem to have in abundance while others do not.

Instead, gratitude is a muscle. It's something we practice, and the more we do, the more we acquire that feeling.

The Jewish people are not inherently more grateful than others. In fact, sometimes it seems that we are uniquely gifted at pointing out what is wrong in the world, and with Kiddush. But the Jewish tradition offers us a discipline that indeed strengthens the gratitude muscle: *Brachot*, blessings. During our prayers we recite so many blessings thanking G-d for all that surrounds us. There are blessings to recite outside of synagogue as well: upon waking up- *Modeh Ani*. Before and after eating- thanking G-d for nourishing our bodies. Upon reaching a special milestone - the *Shehehiyanu*, which marks something new or wonderful happening to us, like a graduation or a birthday. The Talmud says we should each recite 100 blessings every day. Not because G-d needs the praise, but because we need the practice. If we come to synagogue, we take care of a lot of them here. But the big idea is that there are *many* moments during the day when we should be grateful for what we have.

We say our blessings so we can see our blessings.

As I said before: This doesn't mean that everything around us is perfect. But these blessings have us search out the candles that shine around us, as it were.

Modern psychology is rediscovering what our tradition has long taught. A 2021 Harvard Health essay echoes our ancient religious tradition: "In positive psychology research, gratitude is strongly and consistently associated with greater happiness. Gratitude helps people feel more positive emotions, relish good experiences, improve their health, deal with adversity, and build strong relationships. And, although it may feel contrived at first, this mental state grows stronger with use and practice."

Before eating dinner next Thursday night, many American families will go around the table saying, "I am grateful for X." This is a wonderful thing. The Jewish reflex, I believe, is to go one step further and say, "Thank you, G-d, for X." Next Thursday and every day.

Shabbat Shalom.