



Rabbi Stephanie Bernstein  
Rosh Hashanah Older Family Service 5775/2014  
“An Attitude of Gratitude”

A grandmother and her young grandson are enjoying a day at the beach. There isn't a cloud in the sky. The water is blue and as smooth as glass. All of a sudden a tidal wave appears and sweeps the boy out to sea.

The grandmother immediately drops to her knees in the sand and prays. "Please God, I have always been a good person, a good Jew and a loving grandmother; please return my grandson to me!"

Just as she finishes her prayer, a huge wave crashes back on the beach, returning the little boy to his grandmother's side.

The grandmother begins to cry and hugs the grandson that she thought she would never see again. She is overcome with joy and gratitude.

She looks once more at her grandson, then looks back at the sky and yells, "He had a hat!!!"<sup>1</sup>

We are laughing because we know the grandmother in this story. She is us. We often do not fully acknowledge and express gratitude for the many gifts in our lives. We not satisfied with what we have. We want more.

We all know how to say “thank you.” It is one of the first things we learn as little children. We are not so good at expressing gratitude. The lady in the joke has the idea of gratitude—to a point. She needs to do a little more work on what's been called having “an attitude of gratitude.”<sup>2</sup>

What is an “attitude of gratitude?” It certainly includes saying “thank you” in all those situations in which our parents told us we should. Yet, having an “attitude of gratitude” is more than that: it is a way of approaching just about every aspect of our lives. When we have an “attitude of gratitude” we appreciate and acknowledge things—big and small—that make life worth living: friends and family, the beauty of nature, food and shelter, our health.

“Gratitude,” writes M. J. Ryan, “creates happiness because it makes us feel full, complete; gratitude is the realization that we have everything we need, at least in this moment.”<sup>3</sup> Gratitude, she notes, is like turning on a flashlight in a pitch dark room: it “lights up what is already there.”<sup>4</sup>

The Hebrew phrase for shining a light on the blessings that we already have in our lives is *hakarat hatov* (recognizing the good). The word *hakarat* comes from the Hebrew root that means “to recognize.” *Hakarat ha tov* helps us recognize how much good we have in our lives, rather than focusing on what we lack.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.beingjewish.org/htmlpages/funarchives.html>

<sup>2</sup> Zig Ziglar, in “Keep an Attitude of Gratitude,” Beliefnet.com

<sup>3</sup> *Attitudes of Gratitude, 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition: How to Give and Receive Joy Every Day of Your Life*, p. 24

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82

You won't be surprised to know that gratitude is an important moral virtue in Judaism.

"Who is rich?" asks the Mishnah. "Those who rejoice in their own lot."<sup>5</sup>

Having an attitude of gratitude was so important to our ancestors that they even made it part of how we pray.

Towards the end of the *Amidah*, the series of prayers in which we acknowledge our debt to our *avot* (ancestors), there is a blessing called *Hoda'ah* ("Grateful Acknowledgment"). We may know this prayer better by its first words: *Modim Anachnu Lach*, [*shaatah hu Adonai Eloheinu v'Elohei avoteinu v'imoteinu, l'olam va-ed*] (We acknowledge with thanks that You are Adonai, our God and the God of our ancestors forever....). The Hebrew word that begins this prayer, *Modim* (we gratefully acknowledge), encompasses both gratitude and acknowledgement—something for which we have no single word in English.<sup>6</sup>

In this prayer we recognize the good that is in our lives: the miracles that surround us, God's Presence in our lives and in the lives of our people for generations, and the **miracle of our very lives**. The Talmud teaches that we should say this prayer like a servant "who received an allotment from his master" and who "begs leave and goes on his way" (after expressing gratitude). In *modim anachnu lach* "we thank God for God's many gifts to us." Because this blessing expresses our gratitude to God we bow, much as a servant would before the master. Our tradition teaches that, on the first word of the prayer, *Modim*, we bow our back and head in a way that the Talmud says is "like a reed." On the sixth word, *Adonai*, we straighten up again.<sup>7</sup>

The purpose of the prayer *modim anachnu Lach*, writes Judith Hauptman, is "to remind us that we are dependent for our very existence on someone outside ourselves. The world may revolve around us, and we may have an effect on it, but we do not sustain ourselves."<sup>8</sup>

An attitude of gratitude permeates our morning prayers in Judaism, once said upon waking, now said in the synagogue. These prayers thank God for breathing life into our souls, for "restoring our soul" to us when we wake up, for forming our bodies with "skill." Blessings called *Nisim B'Chol Yom* (the blessings for daily miracles) thank God for opening our eyes, for stretching the earth over the waters, for strengthening our steps, for giving us strength when we are weary, and for making us in God's image.

There are blessings of gratitude for everyday miracles, such as: seeing the ocean, seeing trees blossom for the first time in the spring, seeing a rainbow, and experiencing an exceptionally joyous event. And, guess what? There's an app for that! It's called: "Daily Blessings," from the Central Conference of American Rabbis.<sup>9</sup>

It is often easier said than done, however, to have an attitude of gratitude. Bahya ben Joseph ibn Paquda, a rabbi who lived in Spain in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, wrote one of the first collections of Jewish moral

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<sup>5</sup> Pirkei Avot 4:1

<sup>6</sup> Joel Hoffman, in *My People's Prayer Book*, vol. 2, p. 174

<sup>7</sup> BT *Berachot* 34a

<sup>8</sup> Judith Hauptman, in *My People's Prayer Book*, vol. 2, p. 173.

<sup>9</sup> <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/daily-blessings-ccar/id584552550?mt=8>

teachings.<sup>10</sup> Rabbeinu Bachya understood that three things get in the way of recognizing the good in our lives:

We become involved in “worldly affairs” and get caught up in the desire for “worldly pleasures.” We overlook the good that God has “showered upon” us because we become preoccupied with gratifying our wishes and desires. We have a tendency to want more than we have. We think that having “things” will make us happy.

Second, we come into a world filled with God’s favors, so this bounty seems “routine and ordinary” to us. Because these favors are all around us—these daily miracles—we forget that we have an obligation to express our gratitude for them.

Finally, we become so focused on our misfortunes, both large and small, that we neglect to express gratitude for our very being and for all that we do have.<sup>11</sup> “For there are many blessings which people possess and yet fail to profit from altogether—or do not fully enjoy—simply because they are not aware of them and do not appreciate their value.”<sup>12</sup>

The ability to focus on and appreciate what we **have** is good for us! Research shows that just that the act of giving thanks has benefits. A recent study analyzed a group of 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> graders who were asked to list five things for which they were grateful every day for two weeks. The result: those who made a daily gratitude list had a more positive outlook on school and greater satisfaction with their lives after three weeks, compared with a group of students who were asked to list five things that bothered them every day.<sup>13</sup>

A second study looked at over 1,000 high school students. This study revealed that students who display high levels of gratitude (such as strong appreciation for other people and thankfulness for the beauty of nature) had higher grade point averages, lower levels of depression and envy, and a more positive outlook on life than students who were less grateful.<sup>14</sup> **The researchers found that those who equated buying and owning things with happiness and success had a more negative outlook than teens who did not.**

Dr. Robert Emmons, a leading researcher on gratitude, says that expressing gratitude makes us happier. He has his students write a letter describing the kindness of a person they have never adequately thanked. The students read the letter out loud to the person they are thanking. For an entire month afterwards, these students’ levels of happiness went up and remained up, while their feelings of boredom and negative feelings decreased.<sup>15</sup>

Taking a few minutes each day to write down things that make us feel thankful—whether related to other people or tangible things such as having enough food to eat—makes us feel better about ourselves, gives us more energy, and helps us feel more alert. Dr. Emmons notes that expressing

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<sup>10</sup> *Duties of the Heart*

<sup>11</sup> *Duties of the Heart*, pp. 161-167

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 167

<sup>13</sup> Study in the “*Journal of School Psychology*,” reported in “Raising Children with an Attitude of Gratitude: Research Finds Real Benefits for Kids Who Say ‘Thank You’,” by Diana Kapp, *Wall Street Journal* 12/23/13

<sup>14</sup> Study in the “*Journal of Happiness Studies*,” reported in *ibid*.

<sup>15</sup> “Make a Gratitude Adjustment,” by Lauren Aaronson, in *Psychology Today*, March 1, 2006

gratitude is linked to positive changes in our bodies that help us sleep better and that help to counter-balance stress.<sup>16</sup> Other research shows that experiencing positive emotions such as gratitude can strengthen our immune system, release endorphins (nature's natural painkillers) into our bloodstream. Dwelling on emotions such as anger, worry, and hopelessness tends to slow down the movement of white cells, which fight disease.<sup>17</sup> Another researcher, Dr. Philip Watkins, found that expressing gratitude on a regular basis helps our brains to process negative events and traumatic memories, thereby facilitating emotional healing.<sup>18</sup>

We can and should be grateful for just about anything: for our parents, for friends who are there to listen and to laugh with us—and sometimes to cry with us—for the luck of having met our spouses, to God for the wonders of a scenic view...for our bodies, for being able to heal from injury. “The most important blessings,” says Dr. Watkins, “are the ones that are most consistent,” such as our families, our health, our homes.<sup>19</sup> These are the very blessings we are most likely to take for granted.

Dr. Emmons notes that people who write in a daily gratitude journal start to feel a greater sense of being connected to the world. This change is noticed by others in their lives, who find those who express gratitude to be more helpful. The ability to express gratitude touches off a cycle in which our friendships and family relationships are richer and more fulfilling, which—in turn—gives us even more for which we can be grateful. And what an important message this is during the High Holy Days, when we want to repair and strengthen our most important relationships...when we think seriously about how we can be better people in the year to come.

Gratitude is like a muscle that we must keep in shape in order for it to “work” when we need it. Many experts emphasize the importance of practicing gratitude on a daily basis, of taking a few minutes every day to write down the things for which we are grateful.

Those of us who want to take this to the next level can try an exercise created by Rabbi Noah Weinberg: Take an hour to write down everything for which you are grateful. Once you complete the list, add one new blessing every day. Rabbi Weinberg's exercise teaches us that we must first be conscious of the blessings we have before we can appreciate the new blessings that come our way.<sup>20</sup>

Most of us need to start with smaller steps.

Tonight and tomorrow, when we sit around the table enjoying Rosh Hashanah meals with family and friends, what if each of us expresses something for which we are grateful? In the year to come, instead of asking family members, “How was your day?” what if we asked: “For what were you grateful today?”

As you think back over the last year, try to recall times that you felt grateful. Think about the friend who was there for you when you had a disappointment. Recall the parent or sibling who stepped in to lend a hand when you really needed it. Remember the colleague who helped you with a difficult project at

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> “Attitudes of Gratitude,” p. 42.

<sup>18</sup> “Make a Gratitude Adjustment”

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> *Jewish Pathways: Taking the next step. Mussar Program, Class #7. Gratitude: Hakarat ha Tov*, by Alan Morinis. <http://www.jewishpathways.com/mussar-program/gratitude>

work. Picture the gorgeous sunset you saw at the beach. Recall the friends and neighbors who brought meals when you were ill. Think about how good it felt to walk without pain after an injury healed.

Now I'd like to invite you to close your eyes. Take a deep breath. Relax your hands and place them in your lap. Take a few minutes to think of ten things for which you are grateful this evening. You can use your fingers to help you count.

*Modim anachnu lach...*

*We acknowledge with thanks that you are Adonai, our God and the God of our ancestors forever. You are the Rock of our lives, and the Shield of our salvation in every generation. Let us thank You and praise You—for our lives which are in Your hand, for our souls which are in Your care, for Your miracles that we experience every day and for Your wondrous deeds and favors at every time of day: evening, morning, and noon. O Good One, whose mercies never end, O Compassionate One, whose kindness never fails, we forever put our hope in You.*

Source of all blessings, fill our hearts with gratitude for our many blessings. Help us, this year, to recognize the abundant good that is in our lives.

*Amein*