



## READING FOR GRATITUDE

### ***Hakarat haTov / Gratitude***

by Alan Morinis

*Ben Zoma used to say, “What does a good guest say? ‘How much trouble my host goes through for me. How much meat he has offered. How much wine he has set before me. How many cakes he has brought before me. And all of this trouble he went through for me.’ But an inconsiderate guest, what does he say? ‘What trouble has my host gone through? I have eaten one piece of bread and a single piece of meat. I have had but one cup of wine. All the trouble the host has gone to has been only for his family.’”*

– Brachot 58a

The Mussar teachings on the attitude of gratitude are tough because they don’t let us feel sorry for ourselves, no matter how little we may have. One Mussar master began a talk with a thump on the table and the words, “It is enough that a human being is alive!” Then he ended his talk right there.

There is a story—maybe an urban legend, but full of truth nonetheless—concerning the famous violinist Itzhak Perlman. One evening, Perlman was in New York to give a concert. As a child he had been stricken with polio and so getting on stage is no small feat for him. He wears braces on both legs and walks with two crutches. Perlman crosses the stage painfully slowly, until he reaches the chair in which he seats himself to play.

As soon as he appeared on stage that night, the audience applauded and then waited respectfully as he made his way slowly across the stage to his chair. He took his seat, signaled to the conductor to begin, and began to play.

No sooner had he finished the first few bars than one of the strings on his violin snapped with a report like gunshot. At that point, Perlman was close enough to the beginning of the piece that it would have been reasonable to have brought the concert to a halt while he replaced the string, to begin again. But that’s not what he did. He waited a moment and then signaled the conductor to pick up just where they had left off.

Perlman now had only three strings with which to play his soloist part. He was able to find some of the missing notes on adjoining strings, but where that wasn’t possible, he had to rearrange the music on the spot in his head so that it all still held together.

He played with passion and artistry, spontaneously rearranging the symphony right through to the end. When he finally rested his bow, the audience sat for a moment in stunned silence. And then they rose to their feet and cheered wildly. They knew they had been witness to an extraordinary display of human skill and ingenuity.

Perlman raised his bow to signal for quiet. “You know,” he said, “sometimes it is the artist’s task to find out how much beautiful music you can still make with what you have left.”

We have to wonder, was he speaking of his violin strings or his crippled body? And is it true only for artists? We are all lacking something and so we are challenged to answer the question: Do we have the attitude of making something of beauty out of what we do have, incomplete as it may be?

The Hebrew term for gratitude is *hakarat hatov*, which means, literally, “recognizing the good.” Practicing gratitude means recognizing the good that is already yours.

If you’ve lost your job, but you still have your family and health, you have something to be grateful for.

If you can’t move around except in a wheelchair but your mind is as sharp as ever, you have something to be grateful for.

If you’ve broken a string on your violin, and you still have three more, you have something to be grateful for.

When you open up to the trait of gratitude, you see clearly and accurately how much good there is in your life. Gratitude affirms. Those things you are lacking are still there, and in reaching for gratitude no one is saying you ought to put on rose-colored glasses to obscure those shortcomings. But most of us tend to focus so heavily on the deficiencies in our lives that we barely perceive the good that counterbalances them.

There is no limit to what we don’t have and if that is where we focus then our lives are inevitably filled with endless dissatisfaction. This is the ethos that lies behind the great teaching of the Mishnah, which asks (*Pirkei Avot* 4:1), “Who is rich?” and then answers, “Those who rejoice in their own lot.” When you live charged with gratitude, you will give thanks for anything or anyone who has benefited you, whether they meant to or not. Imagine a prayer of thanks springing to your lips when the driver in the car next to you lets you merge without protest, or when the water flows from the tap or the food is adequate.

When gratitude is well established like that, it is a sign of a heart that has been made right and whole. Gratitude can’t coexist with arrogance, resentment, and selfishness. The Hasidic teacher Rebbe Nachman of Breslov writes, “Gratitude rejoices with her sister joy and is always ready to light a candle and have a party. Gratitude doesn’t much like the old cronies of boredom, despair and taking life for granted.”

To what and whom should we feel thankful? In the Torah, when Moses is bringing down the plagues on Egypt, he isn’t the one who initiated turning the Nile River into blood and bringing frogs from the river. His brother Aaron invokes those plagues. The medieval commentator Rashi explains that the river had protected Moses when he was an infant; therefore, he could not start a plague against it. God was teaching Moses a powerful lesson in gratitude: we can open in gratitude even to inanimate objects.

Whenever Rabbi Menachem Mendel, the Kotzker Rebbe, replaced a pair of worn out shoes, he would neatly wrap up the old ones in newspaper before placing them in the trash, and he would declare, “How can I simply toss away such a fine pair of shoes that have served me so well these past years!?” I felt the same way when I gave away my 1984 Honda that had ferried me so reliably for 18 years.

The Mussar teacher Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian (1872–1970) was once talking to a student after prayers and at the same time was folding up his *tallis* [prayer shawl]. The *tallis* was large and he had to rest it on a bench to fold it. After he had finished the folding, Reb Elyah noticed that the bench was dusty, and so he headed out to fetch a towel to wipe it off. The student to whom he was speaking realized what Reb Elyah was doing and ran to get the towel for him. Reb Elyah held up his hand. “No! No! I must clean it myself, for I must show my gratitude to the bench upon which I folded my *tallis*.”<sup>1</sup>

When Torah and our Mussar teachers provide us with these examples of being grateful to rivers, shoes, cars and benches, the gratitude that is expressed is for the gifts borne by these objects, and also (and maybe primarily) to the Giver of these gifts. Think, then, about receiving things from human beings. As someone does something for you, or gives something to you, you have the opportunity to express thankfulness to a being who has free will and who helped you consciously out of the goodness of his or her heart—so much greater than objects, which help us involuntarily. And at the same time and in the same breath, your gratitude goes to the mysterious Source out of which our lives and the gifts we receive have come.

When Leah, wife of the patriarch Jacob, had her fourth child, she named him “Yehudah,” which means “I am grateful,” to reflect her gratitude to God for the gift of another son. The name Yehudah is the source of the Hebrew name of the Jewish people (*Yehudim*), revealing the very direct tie between Judaism and gratitude.

Gratitude opens the heart and that’s why it provides a fine orientation equally to the inanimate, human and divine dimensions of the world.

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<sup>1</sup> from *Reb Elyah* by David Schlossberg, p.121.  
Gratitude

## MEETING FOR GRATITUDE

### 1. Invocation

“Sometimes we only appreciate something when it’s taken away. When we’ve had the flu and then recover, we appreciate what it means to be healthy. But we shouldn’t have to get sick in order to appreciate our health!

“Blessings are the Jewish version of ‘Stop and smell the roses.’ The Sages say that one way to guarantee good health is to say “*Asher Yatzar*” with sincerity. “*Asher Yatzar*” is the blessing that Jews say, believe it or not, after using the bathroom. We thank God for creating our bodies with a wondrously complex system of ducts and tubes. And we acknowledge that if any one of them were improperly ruptured or blocked, we could no longer stay alive. Saying this blessing with sincerity affirms our gratitude for good health.

“We can learn our lesson without the experience of having it taken away.”

(From [aish.com](http://aish.com) by Rabbi Shraga Simmons)

### 2. Review of the previous practice: Anger

Discuss any experiences arising from the practice of calling on humility in the moment of anger, using the “I am dust and ashes phrase.”

### 3. Text Study

1. What do you see as the spiritual importance or value of gratitude?

2. Are these ideas you already had, or have your understandings been influenced by our study?

3. Why do you think both the *siddur* and Mussar practice emphasize that gratitude needs to be cultivated through regular practice? Is it or isn’t it natural to feel gratitude?

4. Each person in the group state one thing for which he or she is grateful.

5. Each person in the group look into the past and find a difficult situation from which something emerged for which they are grateful.

6. Each person in the group identify a present-day difficulty and imagine what it might contain for which they will eventually feel grateful.

7. If gratitude is so obviously good and valuable, what is the barrier to gratitude?

8. How would you express the relationship between messages we receive on the media and the attitude of gratitude we have been talking about?

#### 4. Practice

##### a. Blessing practice

A simple, effective and traditional way to practice gratitude is by making giving thanks part of your everyday life. For example, it is an established Jewish practice to recite 100 such blessings a day. The term for “blessing” in Hebrew is *b’racha*, which comes from the same root as the word for “knee.” When you say a blessing, it is as if you have bent your knee in an act of gratitude. The habit of saying blessings can remind you to be thankful when you hit a green light, or the salad is fresh, or the garden is getting the rain it needs, or your child came home from school as usual.

Can you see how such a practice might slowly but insistently change your orientation to the world and your life?

Pick one area in which you are not currently in the habit of saying a blessing—it could be when you wash your hands before eating, or on drinking a glass of water, or when you see a beautiful person. Or it could be the *asher yatzar* that we touched on in the Invocation.

Learn the traditional blessing—in Hebrew or in any other language—for that purpose and then you have two choices as to how to practice:

1. You can set yourself to open and fill your heart with gratitude whenever you encounter the special circumstance you have picked for yourself; or
2. If you know the formulas for saying a blessing, then do a traditional *b’rachah* whenever you encounter the special circumstance you have picked for yourself. This might be something you want to learn to do, and you can certainly ask the leader of this group or a rabbi to teach you, which they would be happy to do. Commit to saying this blessing regularly for the next week.

Every time you express your gratitude or recite your blessing, hold in mind and heart the intention of giving deep thanks—full and real gratitude.

b. Accounting of the Soul

With the change to a new *middah*, you'll be changing your focus in your **Accounting of the Soul** practice, too. The phrase to use in your morning recitation now relates to gratitude:

*My cup is filled with gifts.*

Now, too, bring the focus of your evening journaling to spotlight issues of gratitude. See if you can identify gifts or services you received during the day, and reflect on whether you did or did not feel gratitude. Note, too, whether you expressed the gratitude you felt.

## 5. Closing

More than any other single quality, the trait of gratitude is the one often stressed in the *siddur* (the prayer book). Some prominent examples are the following prayers:

*Modeh/modah ani*

*Modim anachnu lach*

*Tov l'hodot*

There are chants for each of these lines, any of which would be a good way to end the session.

Confirm time and place for the next meeting.