

The Power of Gratitude

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For Thanksgiving last year, we drove an RV to Arizona. It was the height of the Pandemic. I hadn't seen my parents in ages. It seemed like the only safe and reasonable way to get there. So, my family of four piled into a noisy, bumpy tin-can and drove across the country. It was winter so the water was turned off, which meant we had to bring gallons of our own drinking water, *and* we couldn't shower. The vehicle rattled and bumped. Cans of soup and packs of mac n cheese rained down on our heads at the speed bumps. We were responsible for emptying the toilet ourselves. We were *exhausted*.

I *could* look back on this trip and honestly the entirety of the past year, and sigh. We all could. It was *hard*. We had to do crazy things. We lost so much. We lost time, opportunities, and human touch. All of us.

And yet... and yet, the truth is that the antidote to despair is gratitude, and I am filled with it.

Absurd as it may have been, I am so grateful that we took that trip in the RV. I am so grateful that I got to see my parents. I am so grateful for sitting on a porch, in the cold, and eating corn bread we made in a Toaster oven. I am so grateful for my husband being brave and loving enough to come up with this nutty idea. I am so grateful we could afford it. I am so grateful our boys got to bond with us and with each other on this wild adventure. I am so grateful we got to stop by the road, in the middle of Oklahoma and take in the buffalo. I am so grateful we got to hold petrified wood and cry literal tears of awe at the crimson and golden cliffs in the Painted Desert.

There is a lot that went wrong last year. But this Rosh HaShanah, as we reflect on the year we survived, we have a choice to make. Will we *choose* to look back with gratitude?

Now, to be clear, the year that passed was awful. It was just awful. This was a year when our children lost school. This was a year when folks were more isolated than ever, from young adults to seniors. This was a year when loved ones got sick, and when loved ones died. This was a year of endless aching, pining for an end that never seemed to come... and still hasn't. This was a year of grief and pain and despair. That is unequivocally true. No caveats.

And... And, this was a year which also gave us cause to be grateful. As you reflect on the year that passed, what are *you* grateful for?

The vast majority of Jewish prayer is about expressing gratitude. Over the High Holidays there are prayers of confessional, *vidui*, asking for forgiveness. And during an ordinary week there are prayers of request, *bakashah*, asking God for healing or sustenance or knowledge. But the truth is, that the overwhelming majority of our prayers, from Psalms to the Amidah itself, are in the mode we call *hodaya*: prayers of gratitude.

There is a traditional teaching from the Talmud, in tractate Menachot, that we should strive to say 100 brachot, 100 blessings every day. According to Tradition this idea comes from a verse in the Torah, in Deuteronomy, chapter 10, verse 12 which says, “Now Israel, what does God ask of you? To revere God, to walk in God’s ways, and to love God” In Hebrew:

וְעַתָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל מָה יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר לְקִדְמוֹתָי שְׂאֵל מֵעַמְּךָ כִּי אִם-לִירְאָהוּ אֶת-יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר לְקִדְמוֹתָי לְלַכֵּת בְּכָל-דְּרָכָיו וּלְאַהֲבָהוּ אֹתוֹ

The Hebrew word for “what”, *mah*, looks and sounds like the word *meah*, which means 100. Read this back into the verse and you hear the Torah saying, “Now, Israel, a hundred does God ask of you.” A hundred what? A hundred blessings!

Think about how much that is! What if we said thank you for our food, and thank you for our water, and thank you for our homes, and thank you for the sun shining, and thank you for a rainbow, and thank you for a daffodil, and thank you for a hug, and thank you for going to the bathroom. If we seized the opportunity, could we find 100 ways to say thank you every day? And if we did, how much lighter might our hearts feel?

On Rosh HaShanah, we are meant to hear 100 shofar blasts, 100 wake up calls. Truth be told, this is all about the math of the different sections of the shofar service, the Amidah, and the final Kaddish. But this year, what if we choose to look at those 100 blasts differently? Maybe *these* 100 shofar blasts are the same as *those* 100 blessings. With each blast what if we asked ourselves, “What is one thing I have to be grateful for?”

Our liturgy reminds us to be grateful for so much, great and small. And our liturgy - and this pandemic - remind us to be grateful for things we might otherwise take for granted. I am grateful for the ability to hug the ones I love. I never thought of that before. I am grateful for the ability to send my child to school somewhere that isn't my house! I never thought of that before. I'm grateful for my quiet office. I never thought of that before. But the ability to sit in a space, other than my overcrowded apartment, by myself, is something I will never take for granted again.

We can also be grateful for our privilege. *This* gratitude must serve as a bridge to action. The truth is that not everyone has the same resources. Not everyone has the same support. It's not fair. And there is *so* much work to do to address those disparities. This year I watched children in my son's class struggle to gain education access because their families can't afford Wi-Fi. Some of those families are members of this congregation. I am grateful for my Wi-Fi. This year we watched people without health insurance suffer and grow ill, because they didn't have the means to stay healthy. I am grateful for my health care. This year we watched the lines at the Food Pantry on our block grow and grow and grow. Food insecurity ballooned as so many lost their jobs and lost their income. I am grateful to have food on the table. Not every member of this congregation is so lucky. When we come to understand how lucky we are, we have an obligation to fight so that others have the same dignity and the same capacity to survive *and* thrive.

Finally, this year, we can be grateful for the things we never would have discovered, were it not for the darkness. In my family, we discovered nature. We discovered that Graceland Cemetery, across the street from our home, has meadows full of monarchs and black swallowtails, and an island stretched over a pond filled with turtles and carp. That became our Shabbat Sanctuary. We never would have discovered it, were it not for the Pandemic. We discovered Galena, all the way

east by the Iowa border, where we could safely stretch our legs, kayak down a river chasing a Blue Heron, and watch a beaver building his dam. We never would have discovered it, were it not for the pandemic. We created Sunday night movie nights, with take-out, and found out that our nine-year-old is a fan of potato samosas, salmon avocado sushi, and tilapia tacos. We never would have created that new family tradition, or discovered our budding Foodie, were it not for the Pandemic.

The year was dark and painful. And yet... along the way, what did you discover, out in the world or deep in your heart? What gratitude can we give for the blessings that were always right before our eyes, but that we never before had the wherewithal to see?

In the Amidah, every day, we have a prayer of gratitude, *Modim Anachnu Lach* - God, we thank you. The prayer says we thank God for *nisecha sh'bechol yom imanu* - for your miracles which are with us each and every day. What are everyday miracles?

The rabbis had some ideas. They asked us to say a blessing when we open our eyes in the morning. They asked us to say a blessing when we put on our shoes. They asked us to say a blessing when we wash our hands. These are everyday miracles.

And everyday miracles also come through human hands. That prayer *Modim*, is the one where we thank God for the miracles of Chanukah, and Purim, and Yom HaAtzmaut, all miracles performed by human beings. The resilience of the human spirit is perhaps the most inspiring miracle of all. It is miraculous to see the kindness of a stranger reaching out to provide care for someone they never knew before. It is miraculous to see the courage of doctors and nurses and health care workers who in the midst of unprecedented danger, fought to keep all of us safe and healthy. There is so much gratitude to be had.

The antidote to despair is gratitude. Gratitude will not erase the pain of our suffering. Gratitude will not heal the scars of what we have lost. But gratitude *is* a choice. We can *choose* to look at the world, be honest about the anguish, grieve and mourn those real travails, AND, and also find gratitude by focusing not on what we lack, but on what we have.

This Elul, the month preceding Rosh HaShanah, I decided to start a “gratitude journal.” Any day that I remembered to do so, I wrote down three things I was grateful for. There is nothing that brought the breath back into my body more fully than this exercise. Each time I finished writing down the people, or things, or blessings that I had otherwise taken for granted, I took a deep, full body breath. I know it might sound cheesy, but I have to tell you, that writing down your gratitude can be transformative.

This Rosh HaShanah, may we be grateful for that which we used to take for granted. May we be grateful for our privileges, and fight to see that others have access to the blessings we have enjoyed. May we be grateful for the light that we discovered even amidst the darkness. May we find cause to say thank you 100 times a day, as if a shofar were blaring in our ears, urging us on to find gratitude.

As we are all grateful to have reached this momentous occasion, to have survived this year, and to be standing here together welcoming a new one, let’s say 1 of those 100 brachot. Let us say the Shehecheyanu, thanking God for the gift of this extraordinary day.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שֶׁהִחַיְנוּ וְקִיַּמְנוּ וְהִגִּיעָנוּ לְזֶמַן הַזֶּה:

Blessed are You, God of the Universe, who has kept us alive, sustained us, and helped us reach this special day.

Amen.