

Gratitude

Rosh Hashanah Morning 5779

By Rabbi Michael Z. Cahana

Congregation Beth Israel, Portland, Oregon

As my daughter Sarit often says: “I have a question.” What surprises you? What startles you, by its beauty or innocence or awe inspiring presence, so that you suddenly find yourself stopped short? Think for a moment about what surprises you. I hope you didn’t say “nothing,” because – sorry, I don’t believe you. I don’t know if you believe you, either. We are all capable of surprise, even if we sometimes forget how. We may even think it is frivolous; but it is not. Surprise is a first step to gratitude. And gratitude leads to joy. Surprise does not necessarily mean “unexpected.” We can be utterly surprised by things that are totally predictable: a sunset, a crocus pushing up through the snow, the visual symphony in the turning of the leaves. Surprise can come in a moment of kindness, or the smile of a child. Surprise makes you stop and realize that you didn’t deserve this moment – it was not earned or due to you. In fact, it has nothing to do with you. This surprise was a gift. And a gift, a true gift, makes us grateful. And gratitude, that feeling of appreciation for the undeserved gift, gratitude can save the world.

My family knows that I can be a little obsessive about the moon. Many times they have endured me running through the house interrupting meal preparation, or screen time or homework – “You’ve got to come outside RIGHT NOW” I would say. I would gather everyone up in the backyard as if the Messiah had arrived. “Look, look up right there between the trees!” And there it would be – just like it was yesterday and will be tomorrow. But this is now. A break in the Portland winter gloom, a half-moon glowing warm and inviting – with perhaps a planet brightly shining beside it. “Will you look at that!” I would say, my heart full. My family surrounding me as I shared a moment of beauty. And then with a “thanks, Abba” everyone disappears. I get it. I am, as I said, a little obsessive. But that is the nature of a gift – you want to share it. And even as I stand alone, still staring at the sky until the clouds obscure the light again, I have to say to myself a little prayer – the traditional Jewish prayer said upon waking every day: *Mode Ani L’fanecha* – I am grateful to you, Oh G-d.

Maybe we have forgotten how to be grateful, because we are so busy being annoyed. Unlike G-d, we are quick to anger, slow to forgive. Divine wisdom, however, teaches us the opposite. Wouldn’t it be nice to be a little slower in our anger, a little more gracious in our forgiveness? We can start, by remembering to be grateful.

And this is where I think gratitude is so important. To be grateful you must be humble. To be grateful, you must step out of yourself and your grievances and your annoyance. Even, for a moment, to step away from your outrage. We are grateful when we recognize that we have been given a gift – one we did not expect or deserve. When we are humble we can say with simple sincerity: *Mode Ani L'fanecha* – for the surprise of an unearned gift, I am grateful to you, Oh G-d.

It can be hard to feel gratitude, to be startled, even when surrounded by beauty. We are masters of distraction. We evolved with attention wired to move us on to the next thing. We have built tools to keep us constantly entertained and informed and outraged. Not that there aren't things to be outraged about – and our passion to repair some piece of our broken, broken world is part of what our Jewish commitment is all about. It can be a source of justifiable pride when outrage leads to action. But more often than not, outrage simply keeps us locked in a cycle that pulls us further into ourselves, further into a bubble of like-minded individuals, further away from engagement with the real world. Our own passion, anger and hatred become just another manifestation of our own self-involvement. We live in the era of the “selfie,” the extraordinary obsession with our own curated image. We have elevated opinion over fact, shouting in slogans and all caps rather than conversing. Our culture has become inwardly facing and it is no wonder we are so easily manipulated.

Gratitude is the opposite. Gratitude turns us outward. Gratitude comes from a place of humility not arrogance; appreciation not fear; surprise not cynicism. We are grateful for the unexpected, undeserved gift; a gift freely given which touches our heart.

It can be hard to open our hearts to this gift; to allow in wonder, awe or surprise – to feel grateful. The realities of pain and loss can constrain us. You know that feeling. I do as well. For the last several years of my mother's life, my family and I struggled, watching her lose herself to dementia. Mostly, she lost the ability to speak – a woman who had had Hungarian, German, Yiddish, Hebrew, Swedish and English in her repertoire, reduced to the simplest of self-expression. The hard part was that she knew it and it frustrated her. Many of us have struggled with family members lost to the slow disappearing act of Dementia. However, my mother's last months inspired an unexpected hopefulness in me. In the end, Alice – a life-long artist – was reduced to one word, which she employed readily: “beautiful.” She used it for people – a new doctor she met, seeing her grandchildren, hearing Cantor sing a song to her from Alice's Hungarian childhood. But what was most moving to me was when I would drive her somewhere during her last months. The Fall leaves were changing in their spectacular array. Alice would look out of the car windows, her face would light up and she would exclaim with joy her one remaining word: “beautiful!” Stripped to her most elemental, this Holocaust survivor – who had

seen the darkest parts of humanity - still saw the world with wonder, surprise and gratitude. *Mode Ani L'fanecha* – for colors of the Fall leaves, I am grateful to you, Oh G-d.

When we can open our hearts to gratitude we can experience the world as we did when we were young. We can reconnect to wonder.

Do you remember when the world was new to you? Do you remember being in childhood awe? Do you remember being fearless? Fear constrains us. Awe expands us.

In Hebrew there are two words for “fear”: *pachad* and *yirah*. *Pachad* is the ordinary, crippling form of fear. It is fear of the unknown, fear of the stranger, fear of an uncertain future. It is the fear that some use to exploit us, to manipulate us, to encourage us to act on our most basic instincts. *Yirah* is different. *Yirah* is fear of the greater power: the divine, the awe-inspiring. In fact, a better translation for *Yirah* might be “awe.” *Yirah* also brings us to a place of humility. We stand in awe of the unknown and grateful for the blessings we receive. It is, if you think of it, miraculous that we even exist. So much has to come together to allow our bodies to function. We notice when it does not – when something breaks down. But a more proper response, if we are paying attention, is to be constantly grateful for being alive. *Mode Ani L'fanecha* – for the gift of our lives, I am grateful to you, Oh G-d.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who spoke often of Awe and Wonder as the prime religious response, comments on the Psalmist’s praise of gratitude: “How shall I ever repay to the Lord all his bounties to me!” (Ps 116:12). Heschel says:

The world was not made by man.
The earth is the Lord’s,
not a derelict.
What we own, we owe.¹

What do we owe to G-d and the Universe which gives us so much?

As I was preparing this topic someone who knew I was planning to speak about gratitude sent me a link to a TED talk. The speaker was a Benedictine monk, David Steindl-Rast, who writes on “the gentle power of gratefulness.” His 2013 talk has been viewed over 6 ½ million times. Someone must be paying attention to this need for gratitude.

In his talk Brother Steindl-Rast speaks about our human desire for joy and how often we are unable to find it. We try to buy it, to demand it, to expect it as due – and we are always disappointed when we fail. Joy, happiness, satisfaction in life comes, he believes – and I agree -

¹ Heschel, Abraham Joshua “I Asked for Wonder” (NY: Crossroad Publishing, 1983 – 2006), p. 86

through gratitude. When you are grateful, everything is a gift. What a joyful way to live! Surprise awakens us to this gratitude. It makes us look up from our distractions and see the world with wonder.

Mah rabu maasecha Adonai! Said the Psalmist: “How wondrous are your works, Oh G-d. In wisdom you have made them all. The Earth is full of your creations.” (Ps. 104:24)

Brother Steindl-Rast, in his TED talk, speaks to the power gratitude can unfold:

[Gratefulness] can change our world in immensely important ways, because if you’re grateful, you’re not fearful, and if you’re not fearful you’re not violent. If you are grateful, you act out of a sense of enough and not out of a sense of scarcity, and you are willing to share. . .

Grateful people are joyful people, and joyful people – the more and more joyful people there are, the more and more we’ll have a joyful world.²

Being a Benedictine Monk, Steindl-Rast argues that this is very simple to do. We train ourselves to be grateful by opening ourselves up to surprise – to the gifts we receive. He argues for a 3 step process: “Stop. Look. Go.” But, as Jews we have to make things more complicated. Cantor Cahana suggests we add another step: “Stop. Look. Bless. Go.” Who am I to argue? I am too busy being grateful for her.

“Stop. Look. Bless. Go.” “Stop” from our busy lives for a moment. Be quiet. Put up stop signs. Steindl-Rast tells the story of living for a time in an undeveloped part of Africa where drinkable water was difficult to obtain. Coming back to America he put little stickers on the water faucets to remind himself of how miraculous it was that he could take a drink whenever he wanted.

“Look.” Look around. Open yourself to what is around us. Look with all your senses – hear, see, smell, taste, touch the world – it’s all there for you. And you didn’t have to do a thing.

“Bless.” *Baruch ata Adonai* – bless you, thank you. However I conceive of you, G-d, I can be humble enough to look beyond myself. I can speak my awe, I can verbalize my gratitude. Speaking is one of the G-d given gifts that makes me human. Why be quiet about it? Thank you.

“Go.” With a grateful heart you can accomplish so much. Go to the opportunities to give someone else a gift. A gift of your time. A gift of your wisdom. A gift of your experience. A gift of your compassion. It doesn’t drain you because you are so full. Share in your gratitude.

²https://www.ted.com/talks/david_steindl_rast_want_to_be_happy_be_grateful?utm_source=tedcomshare&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=tedsread

“Stop. Look. Bless. Go.” Not so hard.

Ok. Yes it is. Because we are not accustomed to being grateful. We are not accustomed to awe and humility. It takes a lot, even in super polite Portland, to get us to say “thank you.”

I think the synagogue has a responsibility here. I think our institution can be a place where we can practice gratitude. We can help remind ourselves how very fortunate we are. Even in times of grief, we can be grateful for the compassion of those who comfort us. Even in times of fear, *pachad*, we can find hope in *yirah* in the humility of awe.

Last week, I was in touch with the leadership of our congregation – our President, Glen Levy; chairs of our Brotherhood and Sisterhood, chairs of our committee. I told them I would be speaking on this subject today and I asked them for something simple, but I think profound. I asked that at the start of every Temple committee and board meeting, before we get to the business at hand, we take a moment of gratitude. In whatever manner they choose, to “Stop. Look. Bless. Go.” Anchoring the necessary work of our committees in gratitude. Allowing our hearts to be aware and to express that awareness before moving on. Perhaps our work will be more joyful. It will certainly be more meaningful.

Let’s try it right now. Yes, why not? Do you have someplace you need to be? “Stop.” Hold your breath for a moment. Stop critiquing the sermon. Or looking at your watch. Just Stop. Be present. “Look.” Breathe deeply again and feel what that does to your lungs, to your mood. Open your eyes. Look around you at the magnificent space and the magnificent people surrounding you. Isn’t it a blessing? Use all your senses and allow yourself to be surprised. “Bless.” I will give you an example. *Mode Ani L’fanecha* – for all these things, I am grateful to you, Oh G-d. Personally, I am grateful to be sharing this time of new beginnings with you. I am grateful for the way you honor me by bringing me into your life, during the most intense moments of pain and loss, of joy and celebrations as we share life-cycle moments. It is why I chose to become a rabbi. Ok, now it is your turn. Look to someone near you, now, and take a moment of gratitude. Tell them what you are grateful for. Go ahead, don’t be embarrassed. It will be their turn next. [PAUSE. DIRECTION: SWITCH SPEAKERS]

Mode Ani L’fanecha – for all these things, I am grateful to you, Oh G-d.

Lastly, “Go.” What are you going to take with you from this experience of gratefulness? Did you receive a gift? Did you give one? Can you learn from saying “Thank you.” Can you be more appreciative of the world? Can you be more joyful?

In his book “Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer” Brother David Steindl-Rast, the Benedictine Monk, writes:

The greatest gift one can give is thanksgiving. In giving gifts, we give what we can spare, but in giving thanks we give ourselves. One who says “Thank you” to another really says, “We belong together.” Giver and thanksgiver belong together. The bond that unites them frees them from alienation. Does our society suffer from so much alienation because we fail to cultivate gratefulness?³

Jewish tradition helps us cultivate gratefulness by giving us an opportunity to express gratitude every day. Central to our prayers is the *Amida*, the standing prayer, also known as the *Sh'monah Esrei* – the 18 Benedictions. The 18th of these blessings – even before our daily call for peace – is the *Hodaah*, the “Grateful Acknowledgement.”

Modim anchnu lach

We acknowledge with thanks that You are Adonai,
our G-d and G-d of our ancestors forever.⁴

Traditionally, we wake every morning with a similar prayer of thanks:

Mode Ani L'fanecha, melech chai v'kayam

I offer Thanks to You,
ever-living Sovereign,
that You have restored my soul to me in mercy:
How great is Your trust.⁵

And if that is not enough, we “Stop, Look, Bless, Go” before every meal!

Baruch ata Adonai, eloheynu melech haolam

Ha-Motei lechem min ha-Aretz

Blessed are You, Adonai, ruler of the Universe
Who brings forth bread from the earth.

Our Judaism reminds us not to take anything for granted, not even – especially not – the food we eat. Surprise! We are surrounded by miracles. Even our daily bread needs to be appreciated – its path to our plate pondered, if only briefly. In the Talmud there is told this brief story:

Ben Zoma once saw a crowd on one of the steps of the Temple Mount. He said, . . .
“blessed is He who has created all these to serve me.” [For] he used to say: “What

³ Steindl-Rast, David *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer: An Approach to Life in Fullness* (NJ: Paulist Press, 1984), p. 17

⁴ Translation: *Mishkan T'fillah: A Reform Siddur* (NY: CCAR, 2007), p. 58 and others

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 68, 170

labours Adam had to carry out before he obtained bread to eat! He ploughed, he sowed, he reaped, he bound [the sheaves], he threshed and winnowed and selected the ears, he ground [them], and sifted [the flour], he kneaded and baked, and then at last he ate; whereas I get up, and find all these things done for me.”⁶

Mode Ani L’fanecha – for the gift of those who provide for our needs, I am grateful to you, Oh G-d.

What would it be like to be surprised by a loaf of bread? What would it be like to give thanks for a sunset? Or the kindness of a stranger? What it would be like to be grateful for all the many gifts we are given every day. Stop. Look. Bless. Go. If we could practice gratitude, we would have less time for anger, for disappointment, even for outrage. We would have more time for joy. We would be more like the kind of person we want to be. We would be more like the kind of person we would want around us. It takes a little practice to make it a habit. But you will be more joyful if you do. And those around you will thank you.

Rosh Hashanah is a time when we begin the processes of reflection leading to repentance. It is a time to think of how we can become better. It is a time to make new commitments.

So, let us give thanks. Let us be surprised. Let us cultivate gratitude. Let us help build a more joyful world.

Say it with me:

Mode Ani L’fanecha – for all these things, I am grateful to you, Oh G-d.

⁶ *Berachot* 58a – Translation, Soncino Talmud