

**Rosh Hashanah 2018/5779**  
**Gratitude in My DNA**  
**Rabbi Debra J. Robbins**

“...Piglet noticed even though he had a Very Small Heart, it could hold a rather large amount of Gratitude...”<sup>1</sup> A.A. Milne was right, Very Small Hearts can hold rather large amounts of gratitude. On Rosh Hashanah, our human hearts can hold even more. It’s a philosophy for life and a social science for study.

Here’s an example. Applicants to the order of the Sisters of Notre Dame are required to write a one page autobiography. The personal statements affirm hope, a commitment to service, love of God. They also express, “a rather large amount of gratitude.” In 2001, 700 documents collected over 60 years, in “the Nun Study,” underwent linguistic analysis. The language trends were compared to the lifespans of the nuns. The nuns who expressed the most gratitude, lived on average, seven years longer than the other nuns.<sup>2</sup> Nuns understand the danger of skimping on thanks. They exemplify what Erica Brown means when she says, when we text three letters, T-H-X, “it’s more than a vowel we lack.”<sup>3</sup>

On Rosh Hashanah we pay attention to what is in our hearts. We notice what we lack and commit to restoring the vowels to their places, to giving full voice to gratitude. There is great personal incentive--longer life--and communal reward as well. Studies show, “gratitude... produces a cascade of beneficial social outcomes because it reflects, motivates, and reinforces moral social actions in both the giver and the recipient.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, gratitude helps to repair the world.

The earliest example of gratitude’s dual benefit comes from our matriarch Leah. The rabbis of the Talmud notice her unique role and say, “from the beginning of time no one ever praised God like Leah did.”<sup>5</sup> Leah gives birth to her fourth son and says, “This time I will thank God...” and the Torah records, “she named him Yehudah.”<sup>6</sup> The Hebrew word for thanks and Yehudah are spelled with the same letters, so every time she used his name, Leah named her gratitude---“I love you Yehudah! Thanks God!” His name evolves to *Yehudim*, Jews, Thankful Ones. For us, Thanksgiving isn’t once a year, it is eternal and essential.

At her conversion ceremony my student explained this to her family. She told them how she chose Judaism because we are a community of gratitude. I am thankful she agreed we could all hear her words. “Through Judaism, I’ve also learned that in moments of joy or love or awe, it is my indebtedness to God to express my gratitude. In the past year, to deal with stressful situations, I’ve been reminded that finding a reason for gratitude every day puts things into proper perspective. In these moments of gratitude, I immediately feel lifted and happy to be alive.”<sup>7</sup>

It’s a choice we can make too. Sometimes gratitude flows easily from our lips. When a baby enters the world or a doctor delivers a good diagnosis. When we succeed at something or receive a gift. “Remember,” the Torah teaches, “when abundance fills your life, give thanks to God.”<sup>8</sup>

But there are significant challenges to gratitude. It can be hard to give thanks in the dark, in fear or loss or pain. When we feel alone, face disappointment or despair, we want to cry and rage at someone, at anyone, at the world, at God. In some situations we simply don't know, how to thank, who to thank, what words to use.

Elie Wiesel told Oprah Winfrey, "The words that come most frequently from my lips are *thank you*. When a person doesn't have gratitude, something is missing in his or her humanity."<sup>9</sup> A client at the Bridge, said something similar last month. He stopped in front of the serving station, smiled and said, "Thank you. Thank you for coming to serve us dinner. I have to thank you because I have gratitude in my DNA."<sup>10</sup> If, in the aftermath of the Holocaust, in the reality of being homeless, gratitude can emerge, surely we can do it too.

Today's Torah portion, the Binding of Isaac,<sup>11</sup> invites us consider what it means to be human, to have gratitude in our DNA: to give thanks in impossible situations, to find light in darkness and appreciation in anger, to use words of thanks to help us turn from death toward life, at the dawn of this New Year.

The Torah tells us Abraham was being tested by God. What did Abraham say when the test was over, when he lowered his hand and untied his son? We know these heart pounding moments: the fear in the pit of our stomach, the anxiety in our minds, the high stakes of failure. When we pass the test, we cry out from the gut, we see the world differently. Isaiah's words on Yom Kippur give us permission. "Cry from the depths...Do not hold back, Raise your voice like a shofar!"<sup>12</sup> Maybe Abraham shouted out a prayer. Thank You for my ears that heard the angel!! Thank You for my eyes that noticed the ram!! Thank You for my heart that holds my faith!! Thank You for my son, my beloved son, the future of the Jewish people!! With a clarion voice he gives thanks, big blessings for small miracles, each as unique as a shofar sound.

Now let's talk about Isaac. What did he say when he was unbound, standing upright, unscathed in body, but shaken in the soul? We know this stunned moment. Maybe he lashed out at Abraham, heaping curse upon curse upon him. Maybe he raged at his father's cruel God. Maybe, as the text indicates, he was stunned into silence. And maybe in that moment he offered a prayer. "Wow--I am alive. Thank you God!" Wonder. Awe. Radical Amazement. Gratitude. Maybe he understood what the Psalmist wrote generations later, "I will sacrifice to God, with *t'ruah*, the sound of the shofar, I will sing and chant praises to God."<sup>13</sup> Isaac affirms what the rabbis will formalize as Jewish practice. Our words, prayers, praise, sacred deeds, are our offerings to God. The Talmud imagines in the future: We will not return to the practice of sacrifices, human or animal. We will even cease the practice of offering prayers, with the exception of prayers of gratitude, which abide for all time.<sup>14</sup>

Finally we come to Sarah. The Torah records her death at the start of the very next chapter and the rabbis of the midrash connect the two experiences. They suggest, upon hearing a report of the morning's event, before the messenger can finish, Sarah begins to cry and weep. Her soul flies from her body, and she dies of shock.<sup>15</sup> But what if Sarah lived to hear the end of the story? What if she cried out with joy that Isaac survived the terrible trauma? What if she cried the sounds Maimonides ascribes to the shofar? *Anacha*, the groaning sound of women feeling existential angst. *Yelala*, the sobbing sound from the hearts of women.<sup>16</sup> Many of us have cried

these sounds. Maybe Sarah, known for her laughter, cried for joy and then died, deeply satisfied her legacy would endure through Isaac, a source of inspiration to future generations, to us.

What if those who heard her wordless prayer of thanksgiving, anticipated the words of psalmist, “*Ashrei*, happy are the people that know the sound of the shofar.”<sup>17</sup> This is the solidly happy we feel when we encounter something extraordinary, spiritual or holy, and our hearts overflow with deep appreciation for life. The psalm doesn’t say, happy is the person, but rather, *Ashrei ha’am*, happy are the *people*. A thankful community understands, gratitude saves lives. Thanks can be uttered in the worst of moments, and can change the world. The people who heard the story, who heard the cries, who knew the sounds were Sarah’s prayer, felt her joy. Diana Butler Bass writes how gratitude builds and strengthens communities. Listen to what she writes,

...If you are thankful for something that cuts you off from others or sets people at odds, it may not be genuine gratitude. It may be an emotion birthed in fear or control. Gratitude connects us, even across racial, class and national boundaries, allowing us to *feel* together. We reach out toward one another. We are elevated toward doing good. We might share the “frenzy” of gratefulness. We might find ourselves serving others or dancing in the streets.<sup>18</sup>

Remembering how and when and why to give thanks is the hard work of the 10 days between now and Yom Kippur. And when we shake the lulav on Sukkot, and dance with the Torah on Simchat Torah maybe we will taste what that frenzy of gratefulness could be in our lives and our world, in this New Year.

Dr. Barbara Fredrickson, a social scientist observes, “organizational and community transformation occurs because each person’s positive emotions can reverberate in others. In part, this is because emotions are contagious.”<sup>19</sup> Positive emotions, like gratitude, reverberate, like the sounds of the shofar. They shake loose in us negativity. They inspire us to try harder, to do better, to fix something, anything, in ourselves, in our broken world. A single word of thanks, a small gesture of gratitude, from the human heart, spreads out into the world, in an expanding circle of thankfulness, vibrating with infinite goodness and inspiration.

So what would it take transform ourselves and our society--to start an epidemic of gratitude? What would it be like to take seriously the words of our prayer book? *Modim anachnu lach*...we give thanks, morning noon and night,<sup>20</sup> *Elef alfei alaphim*, for the minute and majestic, millions upon millions of acts of kindness bestowed upon us.<sup>21</sup>

In the ultimate story of transformation, the Passover Haggadah, we, “begin with shame and end with praise.”<sup>22</sup> The Seder starts with the story of slavery and rises to a crescendo with the singing of our ultimate prayer of gratitude, *Dayenu*. The familiar song is our way of saying, the gift of Freedom, or Torah, or Shabbat, would have been enough. Thank you God for overdoing it.<sup>23</sup> It works on Passover and at this time of year too. The S’fat Emet teaches, “The person who wants to talk about shame, should shame himself or herself and the person who wants to praise, should praise the Creator.”<sup>24</sup>

“Begin with shame,” on Rosh Hashanah. These next ten days are the time to reflect on how we have shamed ourselves: told an embarrassing story about a co-worker, teased a sibling,

embroidered the truth, broke the trust of a friend, a partner, a spouse. This is the time to turn to others for forgiveness, grant atonement when asked, choose and pledge and plan to act differently in the year to come. “And end with praise,” on Yom Kippur. No self-aggrandizement or congratulations. This is a time for humility: to recognize the good that *others* have done for us, to give thanks to God for the blessings (and yes, the challenges) of our lives. The machzor contains a list, *Hakarat HaTov*<sup>25</sup> prompts to help us recognize the good and give thanks. And then at the end, comes the shofar, *tekiah g’dolah*--the most triumphant joyous prayer of gratitude--proclaiming freedom and hope and someday, peace.

Giving thanks is more than having an “attitude of gratitude.” Thanks-Giving is an ethic, a way of life. “...Gratitude lies at the very heart of ethics. It is more basic, perhaps, than even duty and obligation.”<sup>26</sup> In our world today, where there is so much polarization, intolerance and disrespect, so much entitlement and ingratitude, cultivating, practicing, engaging in the ethic of gratitude can be our response.

- Filling in the vowels of Thank You in a text, is easy to do.
- Reading a daily prayer, maybe *Modah Ani*, I’m Thankful God, can help.
- Saying the *Motzi* at a meal, or *Sheheyenu* at a special moment, thank you God for all that sustains us, is a good idea.
- Offering words from the heart, like Abraham, Isaac and Sarah, in moments of fear, or awe, or joy, is possible.
- Sharing a moment of gratitude we witness, inspires others.

The research shows, and our tradition affirms, these are the places to start. Almost 2000 years ago the rabbis understood how to build a communal ethic. *Mitzvah goreret mitzvah*. One mitzvah leads to another and another and another. *Averah goreret averah*. One sin leads to another.<sup>27</sup> We add to that litany today, *hodaah goreret hodaah*. Gratitude leads to more gratitude and more and more.

A Very Small Heart can hold a rather large amount of Gratitude. A human heart can hold an even larger amount of Gratitude. And the world, especially on the dawn of this New Year 5779, can hold an infinite amount of Gratitude. The shofar challenges us, descendants of *Yehudah*, the Thankful Ones, humans with gratitude in our DNA, to give thanks with words or song or silence. This is the time and we are the people, to send gratitude reverberating out into the world. On this first day of the year and every day of the year, we can bring blessing to our lives and healing to our world.

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- <sup>1</sup> A.A. Milne, *Winnie the Pooh*
- <sup>2</sup> Robert A. Emmons, *Thanks!* p.69
- <sup>3</sup> Erica Brown, *Return* page 78
- <sup>4</sup> Robert A. Emmons and Michael E. McCullough, *The Psychology of Gratitude*, p,158
- <sup>5</sup> BT Berachot 7b
- <sup>6</sup> Genesis 29:35
- <sup>7</sup> Kathy Retamozo Lipnick, August 23, 2018
- <sup>8</sup> Deuteronomy 8:10
- <sup>9</sup> *Thanks!* Page 183
- <sup>10</sup> Sunday August 5, 2018
- <sup>11</sup> Genesis 22
- <sup>12</sup> Isaiah 58:1
- <sup>13</sup> Psalms 27:6
- <sup>14</sup> Vayikra Rabba 9:7. BT Berachot 54b. Leviticus 7:12
- <sup>15</sup> Pirke D'Rabbi Eliezer 32:8 abridged, Rashi to Genesis 23:1.
- <sup>16</sup> Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Shofar, Sukkah and Lulav 3:2 as interpreted by Aviva Zornberg in *Beginning Anew*, p.176-177.
- <sup>17</sup> Psalm 89:15
- <sup>18</sup> Diana Butler-Bass, *Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks*, p.107.
- <sup>19</sup> *The Psychology of Gratitude*, p.157
- <sup>20</sup> *Modim* p.58 in *Mishkan T'filah*
- <sup>21</sup> *Nishmat Kol Chai* p.189 in *Mishkan T'filah*
- <sup>22</sup> **Mishna Pesachim 10:4?**
- <sup>23</sup> Noam Zion in Haggadah
- <sup>24</sup> Secondary citation. Rachel Anisfeld blog March 21, 2013. Last accessed 8/13/18
- <sup>25</sup> page 424-425 *Mishkan HaNefesh* for Yom Kippur
- <sup>26</sup> Robert A. Emmons and Michael E. McCullough, *The Psychology of Gratitude*, pages v-vi.
- <sup>27</sup> Pirke Avot 4:2