

GRATITUDE

There are two interpretations of gratitude: one pagan-philosophic, and the other Jewish-moral.

Aristotle in the Greek world, and Cicero and Seneca in the Roman world, had little use for gratitude. According to Aristotle, to be in a predicament of gratitude meant to be indebted and inferior. It placed you under obligation, and therefore marked you as subordinate. The "high-minded" man, therefore, would immediately pay back a favor, and even in greater measure, thus tipping the balance in his favor and becoming superior, the creditor instead of the debtor.

Gratitude is thus a prudential quality, it is a question of cleverness in establishing the social relation to your own advantage instead of to that of the other. Gratitude is therefore an element in social mechanics, and is an obligation that should be gotten rid of as soon as possible in order to retain your own social position. This is the normal attitude of most people. It is probably why ingratitude is so common, while those whom fate has destined to be in a position to help others, learn by experience not only not to expect any thanks but to be very happy if they are not repaid with enmity and resentment. If gratitude is a debt, then just as the borrower usually resents the lender because he feels obligated to him,

so is the person who feels called upon to express gratitude.

Judaism, however, never saw it in this light. That gratitude is important, goes without saying. The very word "Jew" comes from "Judah" which in turn, according to the Torah, means thankfulness, for Leah named her son Judah, saying:

הַיְיָ אֵלֵינוּ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ, "This time I will thank God." Furthermore, Saadia Gaon saw gratitude as the first principle in attempting to construct Judaism on a rational philosophical basis. The fact that we are the creatures of God automatically implies gratitude to Him, which in turn accounts for a large number of the Commandments.

Gratitude, in Judaism, is not prudential but moral; it is not primarily social but personal. Therefore gratitude is not an obligation to get rid of as quickly as possible, but a state of mind and soul to nourish with love and intimacy. Instead of constituting an element of tension in social relations, gratitude is an intimate personal relationship, which enhances the person instead of humiliating him.

This holds true even in relation to God, which might be said to be the paradigm of gratitude in human relations. Our thankfulness to the Creator is not a mercantile debt, but an expression of love and closeness. Where certain non-Jewish philosophers of religion saw the basis of religion in man's utter dependence on the Creator -- what Schleiermacher calls kreaturs-

gefühl -- Judaism saw its basis in a personal, warm, companion relationship with God, though He is infinitely superior. Gratitude implies a joy and warmth in relationship. Thus, it is true that we say *אֵלֹהֵינוּ יְיָ*, because God is *יְיָ* the Creator, and we therefore owe Him the debt of our very existence; but, before saying this, we thank Him *כִּי אַתָּה הוּא יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ* because of the very fact that You are our God, that You allow us to delight in Your Presence.

So the Jewish view of God goes beyond Aristotle and Cicero and Seneca. It stresses not subordination but companionship, not prudential debt but moral joy.

Now, one of the differences is this: prudential gratitude, viewed as a social debt, can be expected and demanded, and it must be paid off. Gratitude is the psychological-social payment of a personal indebtedness, unless there is material compensation. This is the way society operates.

Moral gratitude, however, can neither be expected nor demanded, because it must come only voluntarily, issuing as love and joy from a sensitive personality.

Therefore, the moment you lay claim on someone else's gratitude, you have reduced the Jewish-moral gratitude to the pagan-prudential exchange. You have revealed that your original reason for bestowing your favors upon the recipient were prudential in nature, as the anticipation of later reward, and



therefore the gratitude you expect cannot be more than the prudential kind. The moral gratitude, however, can only be offered, never demanded.