

"THANK HEAVEN"

A thousand years ago, the great Rabbi Saadia Gaon taught that our Torah is reasonable and that the human intellect, by itself, can discover the great truths taught in Scripture. Given enough time and brilliance, the human mind can, unaided, arrive at the precepts and concepts revealed by G-d at Sinai. As an example of how reason can provide us with these principles, he gives: gratitude. The very first thing our reason tells us is that one ought to be grateful. Hence, from this principle of gratitude, we learn that a man ought to pray. It is reasonable that we pray to G-d out of gratitude to Him.

Certainly, therefore, intelligent people should not be ingrates. That is why Jews recite the Modah Ani immediately upon arising, why they say the Modim as part of their prayer, why they recite the Birkhat ha-Mazon after eating. That is why, too, Americans celebrate every year, as we shall this week, Thanksgiving Day. It is the first dictate of human reason.

It is all the more amazing, therefore, to learn of the remarkable statement of our Rabbis in their comment on this week's Sidra. We read today of how Leah gave birth to her fourth son, and called him Yehudah (Judah) because ha-paam odeh et ha-Shem -- "this time I shall thank the Lord." Our Sages say, "from the day G-d created the world no one had thanked G-d until Leah came and thanked Him upon giving birth to Judah, as it is said, 'this time I shall thank the Lord' " (Berakhot 7). ~~Indeed!~~ Noah, Shem, Eber -- all these were prophets who discoursed with the Lord. Did they never thank Him? Abraham, Isaac, Jacob -- the founders of the true religion -- were they so callous and indifferent that they never acknowledged G-d's gifts to them? Were they, then, unfeeling, ungrateful brutes?

The answer, I believe, lies in a deeper understanding of gratitude or thanksgiving itself. For there are two kinds or levels of gratitude. Thanksgiving can be understood as courtesy -- or as conscience; as a social gesture -- or as sacred grace; as a way of talking -- or as a state of the soul; as an aspect of personality -- or a part of character.

The lower level, that of courtesy or social gesture, is one in which I give thanks only for goods received. It is a kind of verbal receipt -- you give me, I thank you. It is based on a Theory of Compensation: just as I must pay in cash for what I purchase, so must I say "thanks" for gifts or favors. Instead of paying in dollars and cents, I pay in expression of sentiments. If you do not give me anything, naturally I do not thank you. This is an elementary human phenomenon. The Compensation Theory of Thanks is also reasonable and rational. If I do not thank for what I received, I am an ingrate -- ^{un}/natural, irrational, and unworthy. This is the hodayah, the gratitude, which Saadia believed to be a rational universal principle even without the specific teaching of Torah.

But this is only minimal. It is not spiritual, not truly worthy, it lacks greatness and largeness of soul. This quid-pro-quo arrangement is a commercialization of human relations. It does not reveal any humaneness, any selflessness. Perhaps that is why the French philosopher Diderot said that "gratitude is a burden, and every burden is made to be shrugged off." No one likes to pay, and if thankfulness is merely a payment, then it is no more than a necessary evil.

Furthermore, this kind of ^Kthansgiving can become debased and vulgar.

This week I noticed a sign in ^Aone of our city buses reading, "It Pays To Be Courteous." How materialistic, how truly cheap! If it did not pay, should one cease to be courteous? It is a selfish kind of thanks, it is gratitude with an "angle" to it. It is ^{cut}out of the same cloth as the admonition "crime does not pay" or "honesty is the best policy." At its worst, this kind of "thank you" is nothing more than a "please" in disguise: I am being courteous and saying "thank you" now in the hope and the expectation that I shall be the recipient of your favors again in the future. A lower kind of gratitude indeed!

The higher kind of gratefulness is based not on Compensation but upon Consecration, the consecration of one's whole character. It is a state of mind in which a man is so devoted to the Almighty, so dedicated to transcendent values, so elevated beyond petty, selfish concerns, that he feels himself grasped by a pervasive gratefulness even when he has not received some special favor in advance, even when not bribed into an expression of gratitude.

Perhaps these two kinds of gratitude can be differentiated as "Thanks-giving" for the lower expression and "Thankfulness" for the higher. In Thanksgiving, I give thanks as I would give a tip — it is essentially impersonal and a mere discharge of obligation. Thankfulness, however, is a reaction of the total personality, deeply personal, profoundly human.

The most illustrious example of this nobler kind of gratitude, thankfulness, is our Mother Leah. Her life's greatest ambition was — to marry Jacob and to be sincerely loved by him. When our Torah tells us in this morning's Sidra that v'einei Leah rakkot, "the eyes of Leah were dull" or weak,

the Rabbis tell the following story: what does rakkot mean? Rav says, actually dull, and this is not meant to discredit Leah but is said in praise of her. For she had heard people saying that Rebecca has two sons (Esau and Jacob) and Laban has two daughters (~~Leah and Rachel~~), the older will marry the older (that is, Esau will marry Leah) and the younger will marry the younger (Jacob will marry Rachel). She went about inquiring: what are the characters of these men? She was told that Esau is an evil man, a thief. Jacob is an ish tam yoshev ohalim, a decent, respectable, scholarly young man. And she, therefore, was slated to marry the despicable but successful thief! As a result, she wept so much and so bitterly and so loudly that her eyes dulled, until her eyelashes fell off because of her many tears! Her red, dull, uncomely eyes were beautiful indeed, for they had become so out of protest against being mated to an Esau!

How pathetic is Leah's story! Her love of Jacob is so great that she even submits to her father's nefarious plan to substitute her for her sister Rachel, whom Jacob dearly loves, deceiving Jacob thereby. She is even willing to go to the Chuppah, and throughout life, playing second fiddle to a more vivacious, dazzling, beautiful sister, married to the same husband. And when she finally is married to him -- how tragic her frustration, the blow to her self-esteem! For Jacob does not love Leah at all, and he makes no attempt to disguise his true feelings. With dramatic simplicity the Torah relates the stunning shock of Jacob when he discovers that he had been married, stealthily, to Leah instead of Rachel -- and how crestfallen Leah must have been: Vayehi ba-boker, ve'hinei hi Leah -- and it was in the morning -- and behold it was Leah. It was only Leah, the plain-looking, uninteresting sister! Our Rabbis let us in on the conversation which followed this discovery. Immediately

Jacob turned to Leah and said, bat ha-ramai lamah rimit oti, daughter of the deceiver, why did you deceive me? And she answered, But did you not deceive your father Isaac when you told him, in his blindness, that you were Esau and so took away your brother's blessing -- and you accuse me of deceit?! As a result of these words of reproach that Leah directed to Jacob, he began to hate her. (Tanchumah Yashan).

Pathetic indeed - yet Leah does not give up hope. Her desire for Jacob's love and respect is too precious to yield so quickly. And so she has a son and feels that now he will love her, so she calls him Reuven, adding: ki ata ye'ehvani ishi, now my husband will surely love me. Does he? No, he does not. And so a second child comes, and she calls him Shimon, ki shama ha-Shem ki senuah anokhi, for G-d has seen how despised I am and will make Jacob love me. And then a third child, Levi - ata ha-paam yilaveh ishi elay -- this time, she says, I cannot fail. "Now my husband will draw close to me." But he does not. She has failed, and now she knows it. She cried her eyes out, quite literally, for this man, and he now openly rejects her. Now there is only resignation. The last flicker of hope is gone, the embers of promise for the future are cold and dead. She must reconcile herself to being scorned, unloved, unfulfilled. What would be the normal woman's reaction to this kind of marital problem, to this denial of her whole life's dreams? - despair, bitterness, soured on life, a misanthrope hating the whole world, full of constant complaints.

And here is where the greatness of Leah shines forth in its whole glory. Her fourth child is born -- and she calls him Yehudah. Why? -

ha-paam'odeh et ha-Shem -- for this time I shall thank G-d! This time, when I realize and accept the fact that the greatest, most overwhelming desire of my life will NOT be granted to me by G-d, this time I will thank Him! Despite all my failures and disappointments -- I thank G-d! Ha-paam - "this time," the first time in history, a great soul reached into the heights of the spirit and recognized that thankfulness is more than thanksgiving, that it is a way of reacting to G-d's very Presence, and not merely paying a debt for His favors. Ha-paam - "this time," though my hopes are doomed, my love unrequited, my ambitions dashed, I am yet grateful. I do have a great husband nonetheless. I do have wonderful children. I do have the Lord's promise to be the matriarch of a great people.

This was not the thanksgiving of Compensation but the thankfulness of Consecration. This was not Leah's social gesture, but her spiritual ascent. Would that all of us in our affluent society learn that even if we do not get all we want -- and who does? -- yet there is so very much to be thankful for. We ought to be grateful al nishmotenu ha-
for
pekudot Lakh,/the religious freedom we Jews enjoy in our beloved America. Just compare our situation with those of our brothers in Russia, where the Jewish neshamah is stifled cruelly. We ought be grateful for the hundreds of daily miracles from which we benefit, --- al nisekha she'be'khol yom imanu ... We ought give thanks for life, health, family, friends. In our Nishmat ^{prayer} we speak of thanks al achat me'elef alfei ribei revavot pe'amim -- thousands and millions of thanks. For in this prayer, mentioned in the Talmud, we thank G-d for rain -- every single raindrop!

And it is not only things that we thank G-d for, but gratitude is a state of mind, a psychological attunement to G-d, a climate of conscience, a cast of character, a matter not so much of having something as of being someone.

For ultimately, the ability to achieve this higher form of gratitude is an integral aspect of character -- it requires humility, a humility based upon deep insight. That insight is -- our own weakness and inadequacy in the presence of G-d. When we are grateful to Him, we are cognizant of the infinite distance between us and Him, between our imperfections and ~~His~~ perfection, between our moral failings and His exalted spirituality. Basically, gratitude to G-d means acknowledging our dependence upon Him. We CONFESS our need of Him, our inability to get along without Him. No wonder that in Hebrew the word for thanks - MODEH - also means: I confess! I confess my need of You, I thank You for coming to my assistance! The Modeh prayer we recite upon arising each morning means not only "thank You, G-d" for returning my soul to me; it means also, "I confess, O G-d," that without you I would never wake up alive!

This gratitude, the kind we have called thankfulness rather than only thanksgiving, is what we Jews have not only been taught by our Tradition, but what we bear ~~us~~ as a message to the world by our very names -- for the concept and the practice are deeply ingrained in the very texture of the Jewish soul, and this is reflected in the word "Jew." For the name "Jew" comes from Judah, which is the ^{English} for Yehudah -- the name meaning "thank G-d," the name of Leah's fourth son, at whose birth Mother Leah reached the height^{ts} ~~fast reaches~~ of sublimity in fashioning, for the first time, an expression of thankfulness issuing from a profoundly religious personality. It is a name that we ought, therefore, bear with great pride and a sense of responsibility.

We conclude with the words of David, Hodu la-Shem ki tov, ki le'olam chasdo. Usually this is translated, "Give thanks unto the Lord for He is good, for His love lasts forever." I would paraphrase that, in a manner that is consistent with the syntax of the Hebrew verse: "Give thanks to the Lord, for it is good," i.e. it is good for the heart and soul of the thankful person to be grateful, "for His love is over all the world." Wherever man seeks, no matter how desolate the landscape of his experience and environment, he will find evidence of the great goodness of Almighty G-d.