

Thanksgiving 5778

The Pathway to Joy

You may have seen our latest emails about the second round of our Pathway to Joy project. The first time we sent out that email, I received one in reply:

Rabbi,

What does Joy even means in a world riddled with violence, hatred, bigotry, intolerance and mass murder. How do we find joy then? You cannot escape the constant onslaught!

It's a real question that deserves a proper answer. This week offers one possibility.

It feels like a bit of a chutzpah for me to be talking to you about the history of Thanksgiving...you know better than I do that it began with the first pilgrims as a harvest festival and was enshrined into the culture of America by a series of proclamations culminating in Abraham Lincoln's of 1863. I'm sure you are familiar with its language and would only say that it is worth a re-read - it's truly noble stuff.

This year I discovered an interesting piece of information about the earliest incarnation of Thanksgiving in an article by Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin. It turns out that the Pilgrim leader, William Bradford, later to become the governor of Plymouth Colony, had a Bible with him on the Mayflower. That Bible contained handwritten notes that had been put there by a Puritan scholar, Henry Ainsworth. Ainsworth had written out a list of events that require a prayer of thanksgiving to God:

The sick, when he is healed; the prisoner when he is released out of bonds; they that go down to sea, when they are come up (to land); and wayfaring men, when they are come to the inhabited land.

Ainsworth quotes as his authority a man he calls 'Maimony.' And the list is indeed Maimonides' list - we find it in the Mishneh Torah and these are the categories of events on which we still, today, say the *gomei* blessing (the initials in Hebrew spell the word *hayyim*).

But even the most joyously celebrated Thanksgiving and even the most fervently recited and answered *gomei* blessing only happen on occasions. A question like the one I received - how do we find joy in the most challenging of circumstances, how is that even possible? - needs a more enduring answer.

And I believe that Judaism has one to offer us.

Just about every spiritual tradition has what we might call a 'gratitude practice.' We may be most familiar with the ones that are rooted in Eastern traditions - Buddhism, Hinduism. Called *santosa* in yoga, it is the second of the 'desirable practices,' the *niyamas*, to acquire. Gratitude is also a central Christian virtue (witness Lincoln's proclamation). The Koran speaks of gratitude, and Sufism, the mystical Islamic tradition, has whole books devoted to it.

What *is* gratitude? The dictionary definition is *the quality of being thankful; readiness to show appreciation for and to return kindness*. Brother David Steindl-Rast, a Benedictine monk, teaches that we feel gratitude when we receive something valuable that is freely given, and that every moment of our lives has the potential to be such a gift if we can slow down enough to notice the opportunities that it presents to us. And if we can achieve that frame of mind, then various possibilities emerge - I'll get to those in a minute.

But slowing down is hard. Every aspect of our lives seems to be rushed, from the moment we get up in the morning to the time we crawl into bed at night; and even after we have turned out the light, our minds often continue to rush and swirl, depriving us of the rest we so desperately need. It is genuinely challenging to shift our mindset from wherever it is stuck into the receptive and flexible acknowledgement of how blessed we truly are in every moment, and to do so without making our own - or others' - eyes roll.

This is why the Jewish practice of gratitude is not left entirely up to us to invent or design. It is enshrined in our liturgy - not once, not twice, but three times.

The giveaway is the Hebrew verb *ydh* - the root of *todah*, thanks, and also the root of the word *vidui*, confession. It has a range of meanings. First, it means 'acknowledge,' then, 'express,' then 'thank.' All of these are aspects of gratitude.

The first time we encounter it is on waking up - the *modah ani* we have already explored. We acknowledge the enormous fact that we are once again alive after our temporary removal from the world in sleep. This prayer invites us to set our frame of mind for the day as one of gratitude. There is a simple but profound practice that I learned some time ago of making a list in my mind of things for which I am grateful - a simple list of simple things, my breath, my family, the fact that my back doesn't hurt as much as it did yesterday - and quietly running over it before allowing myself to open my eyes.

The second encounter hides within the early part of the morning liturgy. It's the only psalm in the whole book that is headed *mizmor l'todah* - there's the gratitude word again. Rather than the intimacy of the *modah ani*, this is a noisy psalm - *Worship God in gladness, come before God in joyous song*. It reminds us, I think, to be grateful for that complex set of relationships that is community. The climax of the psalm - *ki tov adonai le'olam hasdo/ve-ad dor va-dor emunato* - contains both the word *hesed*, fidelity and constant love, and *emunah*, trust or faith, as if to remind us that while our own emotions may fluctuate, there is a force in the world that is both consistent and good.

And the third encounter is probably the one we first thought of - the *modim* prayer at the end of the Amidah. We'll be learning this in greater detail when we get to it because it deserves more time, but for the moment I would just ask us to observe that it is structured in ever-expanding ripples of gratitude - for our lives, for our souls, for the everyday miracles we are privileged to witness and for the gift of every moment - all of them gifts which are both incalculably valuable and freely given, as Brother David would have it.

So up to five times on any ordinary Jewish day our tradition offers us a way to practice gratitude. Even if we cannot find the words or the moment under our own steam, we have here a ready-made formula for this important exercise of shifting our frame of mind and changing the quality of our inner noise. When we become actively conscious of those aspects of our life which are gifts to us - whether they are our awakenings, our relationships or those small miracles that we tend to rush on past - we become able to change the soundtrack that plays constantly in our own minds, unconsciously governing our emotions and our reactions to the world outside us. We might want to consider taking five minutes a day to sit quietly with one of those prayers and see what happens...

Because it turns out that consciously adopting a gratitude-based spiritual practice does have long-term benefits for us. It enhances our capacity for empathy, improving our relationships. It can make us help us become psychologically more whole - meditating daily on gratitude is known to have an impact on depression or trauma, for example. There are multiple scientific studies that show that an ongoing gratitude practice is genuinely good for both our physical and our mental health.

And this is a possible response - a real one, not a glib one - to the question in that email with which I began. A practice of gratitude makes it possible, brick by brick, as it were, to build a pathway to joy even when the world seems to be crashing down about our ears. It allows us to express, in that beautifully countercultural way that Judaism sometimes has, that we refuse to give in to our own pain, because if we do, then we cannot address the pain of the world. Instead, we will muster our inner resources by slowing down, by noticing, and by giving thanks for what comes to us freely in every moment. Then we can begin to address what we can give, what we can repair, and what other choices we will make; and we will have greater strength and resilience in carrying these choices out.

And indeed, if we remind ourselves that Sukkot is the Jewish Thanksgiving, and that our actual brick pathway leads to the Sukkah, then what better metaphor is there to help us navigate these challenging times than to build a pathway to joy?

Shabbat shalom.