

Vayetze 5779 Thanksgiving

About nine years ago just before Thanksgiving I was driving with my friend Lizzi from rabbinical school, who is now Rabbi Lizzi Heydemann of the Mishkan congregation in Chicago. We were in heavy traffic and were making our way to LAX. We got to talking about something that might be suitable for sharing with our families over Thanksgiving dinner and eventually settled on part of today's Torah portion - the birth of Leah's first four children.

Here's the piece:

When God saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren. And Leah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Reuben [look! A son!], for she said, "Because God has looked upon my affliction; for now my husband will love me." She conceived again and bore a son, and said, "Because God has heard that I am hated, he has given me this son also." And she called his name Simeon [which sounds like 'heard']. Again she conceived and bore a son, and said, "Now this time my husband will be attached to me, because I have borne him three sons." Therefore his name was called Levi [which sounds like 'attached']. And she conceived again and bore a son, and said, "This time I will thank God." Therefore she called his name Judah [which sounds like 'thank']. Then she ceased bearing.

As Lizzi and I crawled through the traffic, we realized that what we have here are four different models for approaching life - and in particular, approaching the way we relate to the world and what we might think of as God.

Reuven is a way of approaching the world and God through looking at things. Like Leah, we might be driven by a sense of being afflicted, perhaps 'less than.' We might want to tell ourselves that if we can only acquire the things we see, the things we want, everything will be all right and the gap we feel inside will be filled. How many of us do this with objects? The new car, the extension, the state of the art technology? It doesn't work and we still feel empty.

Shimon offers us an alternative - approaching the world and God through listening to things. The challenge here is *really* to listen. The difficulty is that we can hear only what fulfils our expectations - like Leah associating her second son with the fact that she was hated. Such mistaken associations - whether well founded or not - can distort our perceptions. In a similar way, how many times have we been part of a conversation along the lines of, 'you heard what I said but it wasn't what I meant?' Hearing is also an imperfect system. Maybe that's why we constantly have to be reminded '*shema yisrael.*'

Levi offers the possibility of connection – being attached. This is arguably a better approach in the sense that we take down our barriers and reach out towards the other. But I want to suggest that being attached is a fine dance of releasing as well as holding, and a lot of us aren't so great with the releasing bit, or with recognizing that the moment has come to let go. Often there's desperation in the way we cling. And like Leah, we may retreat under the disappointment of our feelings not being reciprocated - whether by other human beings, or by what we perceive as God. Being enmeshed in disappointment, in turn, is a limit on our freedom.

But Judah – Judah is different. The traditional commentators notice the shift in Leah's psyche for this fourth child and point out that she seems to feel that Judah is a gift - more than she anticipated or deserved. She seems to experience that feeling of pleasurable wonder when things turn out better than expected, that rush of spontaneous thanks. And while the feeling is ephemeral - as most, if not all, human feelings are - it seems that our ancestors felt it was important enough to highlight it in our lives. Because we are *yehudim* - Jews - descendants both of Judah and of gratitude.

Lizzi eventually got around to writing down our conversation in the car, and this is how she expressed the thought:

It is this son [Judah] whose name we carry today. Our tribal lineage is, in spiritual terms, one that challenges us to be grateful in the face of disappointment and pain, and to praise God despite things gone wrong and plans unfulfilled. It is not an invitation not to feel those reactions in our lives— God knows, the Jewish people have endured more trials and hardships than most, and we would not be embodying our true humanness if we did not react with honest emotions to the

pain in our lives. But to react with Jewishness is to praise the Master of All nonetheless, to find what there is to be grateful for and thank the Source of it with all our hearts.

This is an orientation that has led us as a People to be known among the nations as a People who sing, dance, weep, and praise together– defying expectations, despite whatever our circumstances may warrant. This constant stance of gratitude is to fully embody a Jew's spiritual heritage as a Yehudi, a person of the lineage of Judah.

I mentioned before that the problem with human feelings is that they tend to be ephemeral. With the best will in the world, maintaining ‘a constant stance of gratitude’ is a significant challenge. Our ancestors also recognized this, which, I believe, is the reason that they require us, three times a day, to express our thanks. This practice is enshrined in the Amidah, in the paragraph that begins *modim anahnu lakh* - we give thanks to you, God [page 436]. This prayer is never absent from the liturgy regardless of calendar or time of day.

And of course, there are other gratitude practices too. I know a person who is part of a gratitude network, sharing an email every day listing out what each member of the mailing list has noticed and given thanks for in their lives. A yoga studio I used to attend asked people to post a single thing they were grateful for every day on facebook for a period of 50 consecutive days. The results were that those who committed to a post a day really did experience higher rates of gratitude for small and otherwise mundane aspects of daily life. Even those who only posted infrequently experienced more spontaneous moments of gratitude as well.

So here is my challenge to all of us. From this Shabbat when we read of the birth of Judah, and on until Thanksgiving, let's turn our hearts towards gratitude. Let's take on a daily practice, however humble, of marking the things in our lives for which we are grateful. Let us be worthy descendants of Judah.

And perhaps, as we begin Judah's story in a week or two, that practice can carry us through to Hanukkah as well.

Shabbat shalom.