

To Be Yehudim: Thanksgiving & Gaining Perspective on Gratefulness

by Rabbi Scott N. Bolton

The Jewish heart full of thankfulness is moved to both action and expression. There are private moments of thankfulness and public minyanim in which prayers and blessings of thanks reach towards Heaven. A recital of a Psalm (#100 appears below) is to capture thanks, if one chooses from the several that highlight gratitude. Giving tzedakah to express our thanks has become a Jewish norm.

As far as prayer goes, siddur compilers from the late Middle Ages forward built on the tradition of thankfulness as expressed in the MODIM prayers of our thrice-daily Amidah. They included the MODEH ANI line (below) at the beginning of our printed siddurim to provide language for expressing thanks upon our waking in the morning.

The writer of the Modeh Ani line (we do not know the original author) relied upon a Zoharic idea of Jewish mysticism that our souls leave us during the night and are faithfully (thankfully) returned to us after their ascension when we sleep. Interpretively, the poet celebrates moving from the sleep state to the wakeful one. Imagine a life of needing more sleep than we already require. And what if we woke up a different person every day with somebody else's soul - worries and rewards? How torturous an existence that would be even if it sounds wondrous for a moment. You recall the story of everyone throwing their troubles in a bag and dumping them in the center of a room; we would take back our own for fear of being overcome by any one else's tzurris.

As the new dawn rises in our lives, the Modeh Ani liturgy allows us to mindfully, intellectually, through words share our appreciation of our lives. The soul is likened to breath and human-consciousness as much as it describes any divine matter or entity planted within us. Whether we accept

mystical-philosophical ideas about the soul or liken the *neshama* (one name for the soul) to the life-force that flows within us and among humanity, editors of Jewish prayer books provided the poetic line as the first with which to start the day.

How do you understand the Modeh Ani liturgy? (below)

**Siddur Ashkenaz, Weekday, Shacharit,
Preparatory Prayers, Modeh Ani**

I give thanks to You living and
everlasting King for You have
restored my soul with mercy. Great
is Your faithfulness.

**סידור אשכנז, ימי חול, תפילת
שחרית, הכנה לתפילה, מודה
אני**

**מוֹדָה אֲנִי לְפָנֶיךָ מֶלֶךְ חַי וְקַיִם
שֶׁחָזַרְתָּ בִּי נְשַׁמְתִּי בְּחַמְלָה,
רַבָּה אֲמוּנָתְךָ:**

The Modim prayers of the Amidah mention that we are thankful for the daily miracles we are blessed with. While medieval liturgists developed further prayers about the soul, we should note that already in the Talmudic age our Sages noted prayers about the wonder of both our souls and our physical bodies.

As there is a blessing for the soul in the first pages of printed siddurim so, too, is there a blessing for our bodies and human faculties.

Jewish law requires the recital of a special blessing after we use the facilities to relieve ourselves. When everything works right we stop to express our gratitude. It has become customary to recite the blessing over our functioning bodies in the morning, after a ritual hand washing. This liturgy serves to elevate our appreciation for cells, sinews, veins, arteries, passageways, firing synapses - pre-thought, expressive language, as well as afterthoughts. It closes noting that God is the Healer of All Flesh. As much as this is about the skin recovering after a small cut and the way organs and pathways work, the poetry magnifies the microscopic, celebrates cellular regeneration and the

miracle of our bodies' every function. God is thanked as the conductor of the grand symphony of the human soma.

Here is the blessing for our bodies with a translation that offers commentary:

**Siddur Ashkenaz, Weekday, Shacharit,
Preparatory Prayers, Asher Yatzar**

(1) Blessed are You, Adonoy our God, King of the Universe, Who formed humanity with wisdom *This may mean either that man was formed by God's wisdom, or that God formed man and endowed him with wisdom.* and created within him openings and hollows. It is obvious and known in the presence of Your glorious throne *In refutation of those who claim that God is not concerned with earthly matters, we declare that even in the presence of His glorious throne, where He is surrounded by myriads of angels, He is aware of the mundane needs of each individual.*—*Vilna Gaon* that if one of them were ruptured, or if one of them were blocked, it would be impossible to exist and stand in Your Presence even for a short while. Blessed are You, Adonai, Who heals all flesh and performs wonders.

סידור אשכנז, ימי חול, תפילת

שחרית, הכנה לתפילה, אשר

יצר

(א) בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ
הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר יָצַר אֶת־הָאָדָם
בְּחִכְמָה וּבְרָא בּוֹ נְקֻבִים וְנֻקְבִים
חֲלוּלִים חֲלוּלִים גְּלוּי וַיְדַוֶּעַ לְפָנָי
כִּסֵּא כְבוֹדְךָ שָׂאם יִפְתַּח אֶחָד
מֵהֶם אוֹ יִסְתֵּם אֶחָד מֵהֶם אִי
אֶפְשֵׁר לְהִתְקִים וְלַעֲמֹד לְפָנֶיךָ
אֶפִּילוּ שְׁעָה אַחַת. בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה
יְהוָה רוֹפֵא כָּל־בָּשָׂר וּמַפְלִיא
לַעֲשׂוֹת:

Contemplating our bodies has us ponder illness and suffering. The gift of our

health comes into focus all too often, as we battle sicknesses and confront disease. The Talmud notes that among the categories of people who are required to give thanks to God with a special blessing are those who recover from ailments and who receive life-saving medical treatments.

Berakhot 54b

Rav Yehuda said that Rav said: Four must offer thanks to God with a thanks-offering and a special blessing. They are: Seafarers, those who walk in the desert, and one who was ill and recovered, and one who was incarcerated in prison and went out. [The Talmudic Sages derive these categories through a Midrashic reading of Psalms 107.]

ברכות נ"ד ב:י"ב

אָמַר רַב יְהוּדָה אָמַר רַב: אַרְבָּעָה
צְרִיכִין לְהוֹדוֹת: יוֹרְדֵי הַיָּם, הוֹלְכֵי
מִדְבָּרוֹת, וּמִי שֶׁהָיָה חוֹלָה
וְנִתְרַפָּא, וּמִי שֶׁהָיָה חֲבוּשׁ בְּבַיִת
הָאֲסוּרִים וַיֵּצֵא.

They recite the following blessing:

**Siddur Ashkenaz, Shabbat, Shacharit,
Keriat Hatorah, Reading from Sefer,
Birkat Hagomel**

After one has an aliyah or between aliyot:

The one who gives thanks recites Birkat HaGomel: Blessed are you God, Ruler of the Universe, Who Grants Goodness to Those in Distress and Need. The Holy One

**סידור אשכנז, שבת, שחרית,
קריאת התורה, קריאת התורה,
ברכת הגומל**

(א) ברכת הגומל: בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה'
אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם. הַגּוֹמֵל
לְחַיִּיבִים טוֹבוֹת. שְׂגַמְלֵנִי כָּל טוֹב:
(ב) הַקֹּהֵל עוֹנָה אֱמֵן. וְאוֹמְרִים:
מִי שְׂגַמְלֶךָ טוֹב. הוּא יְגַמְלֶךָ כָּל
טוֹב סְלָה:

has Bestowed Goodness Upon Me
[I Thank and Praise God for This
Kindness].

The Congregation Answers: May
the One Who bestowed kindness
upon you redeem you and restore
you always and forever!

In synagogue life, the recitation of Birkat HaGomel, the blessing of gratitude, thanks and deliverance is a moving moment at the Torah. Life may have been in the balance for those who affirm God's blessings. The power of the communal, antiphonal response is comforting in itself and calls on God to continue the flow of Divine goodness.

Those who have flown overseas recite Gomel to express appreciation for the miracle of technology as much as being delivered from danger. Those who have routine medical procedures that repair blockages heighten their senses of appreciation. Mothers recovering from birthing recite it publicly either at the Torah service or in a public gathering - at the bris or at a baby naming. While there is less risk in giving birth in our time there is still danger. And there is the awesome miracle of childbirth itself!

We have expanded on the categories of the Talmud to include mothers who have given birth. Those who are required and take the opportunity to "bench Gomel" or say the blessing of thanksgiving pronounce to the community: "God who bestows kindnesses, who granted me such goodness!" The language hearkens back to the profundity and elegance of creation itself. And the congregation responds: "May the Divine who granted you goodness continue to bless you with such kindnesses forever!" May you be safe. May you navigate your life knowing such goodness, thankfulness, wholeness.

Examining the categories of people the Talmud recognizes as requiring to show gratitude to God with Birkat HaGomel will serve for an exploration of

gratefulness generally. Any codific passage of Jewish law has behind it deep understandings of the human condition.

What does it mean to "cross the sea" in our time and give thanks? Sea voyages were once dangerous endeavors for the average sailor. Passengers who dared trans-Atlantic voyages to make it the new world risked a great deal. There are those who face similar risks today despite cruise ships safety and recreational boating being safe. Refugees running from tyranny or war zones to start their lives anew are familiar pictures in newspapers and on television. Rafts or not so sea-worthy vessels have been overloaded with those crossing the seas. For that matter, they have also walked across deserts.

What does it mean to "cross, or walk through, the desert" in our day? Whenever we face existential threats and remember that others have gratitude for the relative ease of our lives increases. While it is not always healthy to compare ourselves to others, the perspective gained and gratitude garnered concerning our own portions, even suffering, gains us altitude.

We recognize that God is still a redeemer. I think of Soviet Jews' long winter, and their journeys to North America and Israel. I am reminded of the marches and airlifts of the Ethiopian Jewish community out of Africa. Elders of the community with infants on their shoulders marched through deserts to reach points of departure for modern Israel. My sense of thankfulness is heightened, for the fact that we live in a time when God partners with our People to create safe haven and redeems Jewish People to situate them in flourishing Jewish diaspora lands and the State of Israel.

Though I did not have to break any shackles and wander through a desert to reach the shores of America, I recall the many who fled from pogroms or narrowly escaped the clutches of the Nazis. The desert, in our symbolic reading of the Talmudic passage, represents the vacuum of humanity that is beyond evil. The ones walking - *holkhim* in Hebrew - are Jewish People globally holding fast to halakha - Jewish law (shares a root with holekh, to walk) - despite the challenges of the modern world. That includes assimilation.

Anywhere a fertile landscape for Jewish culture and existence exists is a cause for gratitude. While I would not hold that one who feels grateful like this is required a Birkat haGomel at the Torah weekly I would be open to someone in my congregation coming forward who had any connection to the "wandering through a desert of human making" where a nourishing environment was made deadly by the scorpions of humanity threatening to strike.

To return to the simple sense of the Talmudic language and category of those required to bless Gomel and give thanks to God - in the past, a journey through the arid, dry desert landscape presented challenges to physical survival. Given what we know of the challenges to Jewish survival and recognizing deliverance continues in our time, an expansive look at our categories is required.

What does it mean to be sick and to be healed in our time? Today, even with the miracles of modern medicine, we are confronted with disease that escapes explanation and permanent solutions. Our response is to maximize our recognition that researchers, health professionals and technological tools of advanced medicine deserve our praise, thanks and gratitude. Congregants have come to ask me: may I bench gomel (typical Yiddishism for pronouncing Birkat HaGomel) if I have been treated and I'm feeling better but we don't know if the disease is completely gone?" Yes!" I tell them. Come to the Torah to give thanks for the goodness. Let the congregational response add to your own prayers that God continue bestowing kindnesses and goodness upon you - and wisdom and strength to all who care for you.

When we are thankful for the application of wisdom and investment of our doctors, nurses and technicians, we create more opportunity for our bodies to heal. We do not believe in miracle healing. We do not believe in magic or that blessings work like medications or medical procedures, but we believe in lifting the spirit and increasing our gratitude quotient, because that bolsters the strength of those facing life-threatening diseases both physical and mental. We are aware of both physical and mental illnesses and have defined them and treatments for them in a way that our ancestors could not. Turning to God, or at the very least, being strengthened through the communal ritual

of blessing Gomel instead of She'hekhayanu is powerful. The congregation responds beyond amen - with a prayerful hope that goodness continues to flow to the one who has known whatever measure of healing he or she has experienced.

And then how should we learn from the category of "those who were freed from prison?" coming to thank God? Is this a typical experience in our communal Jewish life? The Rabbis wrote of a time when prisoners of conscience would be held captive more than they were focused on incarceration for crimes. Imprisoned for holding fast to their beliefs and teaching Torah publicly, Sages were tortured and made to recant. Sometimes they were ransomed and other times executed. Throughout Jewish history authorities would imprison Jewish leaders who, to their minds, represented threats. The wealth of Jewish communities was depleted by ransoming Jewish captives. Maimonides listed the redemption of such captives as one of the most important mitzvot a community must do.

In a more symbolic way, we note examples of being "freed from the prisons of tyrants." Remember Natan Sharansky's words, "'Don't disturb me, I'm playing chess.'" To his jailers he was quite mad. He later described that the freedom of his mind to play chess, to play thousands of games black against white" was a way to overcome his capture. Stories of the Jewish People and hope in God or the power that makes for collective salvation, in more Kaplanian terms, got him through. Israel and Jewish Peoplehood provided staying power. Coming to express that with a blessing or allowing that to inform every day's blessings is at the heart of our gratefulness.

Jews continue to face anti-semitism and existential threats. When I look at the words of Birkat HaGomel I hear the voices of those who survived the shooting at the synagogue massacre at Eitz Haim Synagogue in Pittsburgh. I think of Poway and the Chabad House. I think of the arson at the Hillel House in Delaware. I think of the many crimes against Jewish people and places in America. Recalling these incidents and dangers does not cripple us nor does it make us only focus on the lachrymose lineup of Jewish happenings, events or historical moments. We do not keep ourselves in "the prison of Jewish perception that the entire world is out to destroy us." We

break through that barrier even while we remember, recall, recount and retell the important stories when we suffered, when our books or people burned or were murdered. But we free ourselves of that prison, to live our lives engaged as modern Jews who embrace power and plenty where we have it. And we overcome the tyranny of regimes that threaten us by joining forces with Am Yisrael in the Modern State of Israel and partners in lands of freedom where we live around the globe.

Our gratitude increases when we recognize the power we have to free ourselves from the prisons of our minds, when auto-pilot plagues us or the time has come to shift focus. How many relationships would be better served if we freed ourselves from the perspectives we have locked into the cages of our mind?

Knowing that there is a straightforward way to understand a Talmudic ruling and category of people who are obligated for a certain blessing does not stop us from exploring new dimensions of meaning, when it comes to our texts. We have explored deeper understandings that arise from a study of the people our Rabbis said were required to pronounce the Gomel blessing. And only one other remains which was subsequently added by some authorities and referenced and discussed in medieval halakhic works. What of the mother who gave birth publicly pronouncing the blessing of thanksgiving and salvation?

Of course, childbirth was a dangerous endeavor and still is in so many parts of our world. That alone is enough to understand why our tradition would invite and even require a birth-mother to pronounce her thanks publicly and receive the blessings of the community in return. It is a way of holding God accountable, as well! But is there a deeper message for all of us about what life experiences we have and the gratitude that we generate?

We often hear, metaphorically, about birthing a new book into the world or an idea. The liturgy of the High Holy Days makes use of the pregnancy metaphor. Poetry about the pregnant potential of the coming new year engages in well-grounded experience for both women and men (less physically, of course). Ideals about Jewish prayer arise through reading

passages concerning the ancestral Imahot, the Mothers of Israel. It is Leah who is credited in the Talmud with being the very first to thank God for receiving more than her portion.

Berakhot 7b

ברכות ז' ב:ה'

And Rabbi Yoḥanan said in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai: From the day the Holy One, Blessed be He, created the world, no one thanked the Holy One, Blessed be He, until Leah came and thanked Him, as it is stated:

“And she became pregnant and gave birth to a son, and she said, ‘This time I will give thanks to God,’ and thus he was called Judah” (Genesis 29:35).

וְאָמַר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן מִשּׁוּם רַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן
בֶּן יוֹחִי: מִיּוֹם שֶׁבָּרָא הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ
הוּא אֶת עוֹלָמוֹ לֹא הָיָה אָדָם
שֶׁהוֹדָה לְהַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא, עַד
שֶׁבָּאֲתָה לֵאָה וְהוֹדִיתוֹ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר:
“הַפַּעַם אוֹדָה אֶת ה'”.

Rabbi Abraham J. Heschel shared, “How strange we are in the world, and how presumptuous our doings! Only one response can maintain us: gratefulness for witnessing the wonder, for the gift of our unearned right to serve, to adore, and to fulfill. It is gratefulness which makes the soul great.”

How appropriate it is that we are named as a People YEHUDIM, those who will give thanks and echo thanks throughout the world and for all generations. While we reserve the right to wrestle with God as the name YISRAEL connotes, we also link ourselves to the name that Leah gave to our great ancestor Judah, Yehudah - in Hebrew we are YEHUDIM. Those that give thanks and make great our souls.

To express our thanks each of us finds our own ways, and among our traditions is the recital of Psalms of thanksgiving, as well:

Psalms 100

(1) A psalm of thanksgiving. Raise a shout for the LORD, all the earth; (2) worship the LORD in gladness; come before the Divine Presence with shouts of joy. (3) Acknowledge that the LORD is God; God made us and we are His, God's people, the flock he tends. (4) Enter the Divine's gates with praise, God's courts with acclamation. Praise Him! Bless His name! (5) For the LORD is good [God flows kindness to the world forever and re-establishes creation daily]; His steadfast love is eternal; His faithfulness is for all generations.

תהילים ק'

(א) מְזַמֵּר לְתוֹדָה הָרִיעוּ לַיהוָה
כָּל־הָאָרֶץ: (ב) עֲבַדוּ אֶת־יְהוָה
בְּשִׂמְחָה בָּאוּ לְפָנָיו בְּרִנָּה: (ג)
דַּעוּ כִּי־יְהוָה הוּא אֱלֹהִים
הוּא־עָשָׂנוּ וְלֹא [וְלוֹ] אֲנַחְנוּ עַמּוֹ
וְצֵאן מִרְעִיתוֹ: (ד) בָּאוּ שְׂעָרָיו |
בְּתוֹדָה חֲצִרְתִּיו בְּתִהְלָה
הוֹדוּ־לֵו בְּרָכוּ שְׁמוֹ: (ה) כִּי־טוֹב
יְהוָה לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ וְעַד־דָּר וְדָר
אָמוֹנְתוֹ: