

Thanksgiving Reflections

By Lois and Ken Goldrich



During the Fall season, we read the Book of Genesis – a spirited narrative recounting the experiences of our ancestors. In *Parashat Vayetzze*, we find the Patriarch Jacob working in the home of his uncle Laban, laboring tirelessly to win the hand of his beloved Rachel. As we all know, he ends up with two wives, Rachel and her sister Leah. Understanding that Jacob prefers Rachel, God seeks to compensate Leah by “opening her womb,” allowing her to bear four sons.

Regarding the fourth son, we read: “She conceived again and bore a son, and declared, ‘This time I will thank (*odeh*) the Lord.’ Therefore she named him Yehudah (English: Judah).” (Gen. 29:35) Yehudah, from the same root as *today*, thanks.

It is not surprising that we, as a people, *Yehudim*, have come to be identified by the name of this son, Yehudah. For one of the hallmarks of the Jewish nation has been our ongoing commitment to praise the Almighty and to thank God for demonstrating a continued interest in our national destiny.

Still, when Leah chose, in naming her son, to thank God for granting her the gift of children, she demonstrated a keen awareness that God’s role is not limited to intervention in our collective affairs. Rather, it can be felt by each of us in our own lives. Leah was not simply thanking the Lord on behalf of her people -- she was uttering a personal prayer of thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving -- a Jewish tradition. And, as we know, a North American tradition as well. Both cultures recognize the need to thank God for the good in our lives, and both provide ways in which we can express our gratitude.

How can we thank God each day?

◆◆ One way is through our prayers. How do we begin each day? By reciting *Modeh/Modah Ani*, thanking God for restoring our souls to us each morning. In addition, we include a special blessing of thanks every time we recite the *Amidah*. This long section, which begins “*Modim anahnu lakh*!” and ends with the *berakhab* of “*l’hodo!*” (to give thanks) is unchanging, whether we recite it on a weekday, on *Shabbat*, or during a Festival. In addition, to emphasize the importance of giving thanks, we actually bow as we begin and end this section.

◆◆ How else do we thank God? We do it through acting ethically, kindly, and generously, modeling in our own behavior those qualities ascribed to God. As the *midrash* relates: “Just as God is gracious and compassionate, you too must be gracious and compassionate...As the Holy One is faithful, you too must be faithful. As the Holy One is loving, you too must be loving.” Can we get away simply with paying lip service to these admirable qualities? Absolutely not! As the Talmud relates: “As God clothes the naked, you should clothe the naked. [As] the Holy One visited the sick, you should visit the sick. [As] the Holy One comforted those who mourned, you should comfort those who mourn. [As] the Holy One buried the dead, you should bury the dead.” Clearly, we can’t get away with delegating these tasks to others.

◆◆ We thank God when we are optimistic and when we demonstrate that “*Ashreinu mah tov helkein!*” is more than just a children’s song -- that we are indeed happy with our lot and appreciative of God’s role in our life. It’s easy to remember God when things go wrong and to ask for help when we’re facing hard times. It’s harder to keep in mind that God is there when things go right and when good things do happen to good people.

◆◆ Another opportunity to show our gratitude arises when we hear good news. In reciting the blessing “*Barukh Atah...hatov v’hametiv*” (Bless are You our God...Who is good and does good),” we acknowledge the beneficent influence of God in our lives.

We read in Psalms: “The earth is God’s in all its fullness.” (Ps. 24:1) But in a later Psalm we read that “The heavens are God’s heavens and the earth (God) gave to mankind.” (Ps. 115:16) How can we reconcile these seemingly contradictory statements? According to the Talmud, the answer lies in giving thanks -- in explicitly recognizing God’s role in the world. Everything belongs to God. Yet, when we recite a *berakhab* -- whether on eating an apple, smelling fragrant spices, or witnessing the beauty of nature -- we acknowledge God’s sovereignty over all the earth and therefore gain the right to enjoy all that we have. A small price to pay for so large a gift!

Consider reciting Psalm 100 (*Mizmor L'Todah*, A Psalm of Thanksgiving) at your Thanksgiving table this year, as it was recited in the Temple when a thanksgiving offering was made. And -- in the words of the Psalm -- may we be privileged this Thanksgiving to “worship God in happiness and come before God in joyful song.”

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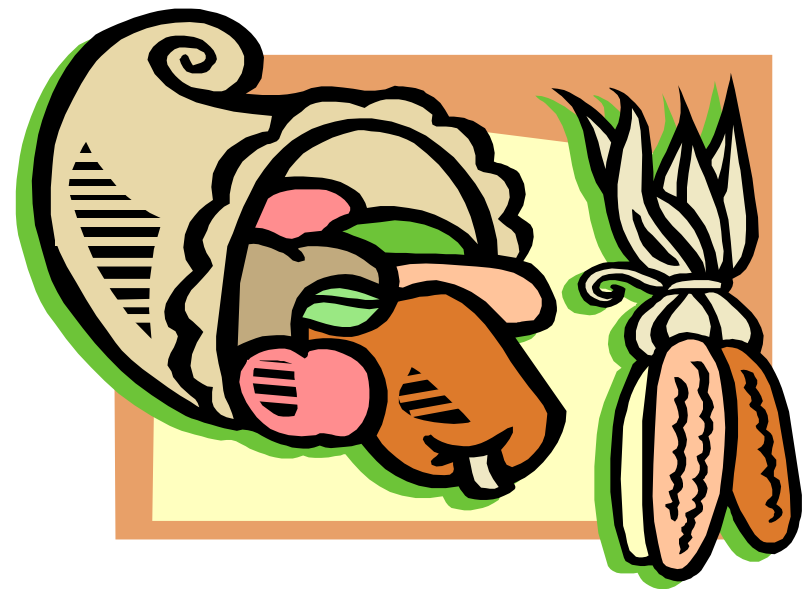
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