

Gratitude and the Birth of Judaism

Parashat Vayetzei, Genesis, Chapters 28-30 | November 12, 2021

In November of 1789, George Washington, recently inaugurated as president in New York City, declared a National Day of Thanksgiving. And New York's leading Jewish congregation, known as Shearith Israel, immediately embraced the observance of the day. In this, the Jews of New York were guided by their spiritual leader, Gershon Mendes Seixas, who had just recently joined other clergy in Washington's inaugural parade—very possibly the first time a Jewish religious representative had participated in the installation of a head of state since the fall of Jerusalem. On Thanksgiving Day, Seixas spoke at Shearith Israel, delivering what was certainly the first Thanksgiving address in a synagogue since the adoption of the Constitution. In his sermon, given on November 26, 1789, he expressed his profound gratitude for a government that was, “founded upon the strictest principles of equal liberty and justice.” Then, at a Thanksgiving Day service several years later, Seixas declared as follows:

As Jews, we are even more than others called upon to return thanks to God for placing us in such a country—where we are free to act according to the dictates of conscience, and where no exception is taken from following the principles of our religion.

Thanksgiving in America, Seixas is saying, is particularly incumbent upon Jews.

Now of course, Jewish thanksgiving—the expression of gratitude—did not begin in 1789, and rightly understood, it lies at the origin of the faith known today as Judaism. Gratitude is not only also a quintessential Jewish virtue, but one which is, more than any other, reflected in the very name by which we know our faith today.

Jacob flees from his home and from his brother's wrath and spends the night at a mysterious site that,

unbeknownst to him, is steeped in sanctity. This is testified to by the vision that he sees in his slumber:

And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it. (Genesis 28:12)

Who are these angels? Are they meant to symbolize something, or does the dream signify that Jacob actually lies at a location of angelic ascension? Commentators diverge, but many do see symbolism here. One such example is the 17th-century Sephardic theologian Rabbi Manasseh Ben Israel, who drew on the rabbinic text known as *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer* in arguing that the rising and falling of the angels represents the assortment of empires that would persecute, conquer, and exile the Jewish people throughout their history. But in the end, Manasseh explained, those that rose will also fall, ending up on the ash heap of history, with Israel enduring, and all of Jacob's dreams fulfilled. Thus, the nighttime vision depicts the many nights of darkness that would descend upon Israel, while also predicting Israel's eternity. It is a fascinating interpretation, but considering the tale of Jacob that is about to unfold, thinking of the long and winding road he will encounter and the challenges that will abound, perhaps there is another intriguing understanding of Jacob's vision.

Perhaps the angels in the Torah do not represent kingdoms. Perhaps they represent the dream itself. Behold, the angels of God rise and fall. The prospects for the success of Jacob's dreams of the future rise and fall. No great dream succeeds immediately. There are achievements and also setbacks. Ascensions and descensions. There is no great leader who does not experience setbacks. No great and successful dreamer whose prospects have not at some point plummeted. After all, this dreamer himself, Jacob, dreamed of becoming patriarch of a people, father of a nation. But few figures

in the Bible experienced setbacks such as his. Years of exile, fleeing his murderous brother, suffering the apparent loss of a child, experiencing exile again in Egypt, to return to the Holy Land only after his death. It will be an extraordinary life, one of the most influential in history, but the chapters about him that will unfold will also be filled with apparent failures and so much pain. Every great dream fulfilled has failures. Every dreamer has moments in the wilderness. It is Jacob who will form the Nation of Israel, but his life will have so much more sadness than that of his patriarchal predecessors. And as we shall see, what will be true of Jacob will also be true of the matriarchs who will join him in creating the house of Israel. Their legacies will also be eternal, but their lives too will be filled with much suffering—with love denied, and dreams deferred.

Jacob arrives in his family's Mesopotamian town, and there he encounters his cousin Rachel. She is stunningly beautiful, and he falls immediately in love. Her father, Jacob's uncle Laban, *Lavan*, agrees to a match in exchange for seven years of work. Jacob enthusiastically agrees:

And Jacob worked seven years for Rachel; and they seemed unto him but a few days, for the love he had for her. (Genesis 29:20)

Leon Kass has aptly describes the exquisite nature of this verse:

This is, for me, one of the most beautiful sentences of the entire book. No poet has spoken better of love's power to inspire devotion, to lighten hardships, and to defy the ordinary course of time.

Kass also very cleverly compares it to a phrase from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, where Ferdinand must labor at Prospero's command in order to marry Miranda. He says:

This my mean task,

Would be as heavy to me as odious, but

The mistress which I serve quickens what's dead

And makes my labors pleasure.

Thus, the seven years pass quickly for Jacob. But Laban, at the last moment, switches Rachel for her elder sister Leah, which Jacob does not discover until the morning after the wedding. He marries Rachel seven days later in exchange for seven more years of work.

But of course, Rachel remains his true love. Leah in contrast is, in the Hebrew wording of the Bible, "*s'nuab*," "hated." This means, as many note, not that Jacob hated her, but that she was less loved, and one denied love feels hated, resulting in the intense pain of a woman in an impossible position. God, in sympathy with her suffering, bestows children upon Leah even as Rachel is barren. But this, in the end, results in the profound unhappiness of both. Denied children, Rachel finds Jacob's favoritism insufficient. Meanwhile, Leah longs so profoundly for her husband's devotion that her initial names for her children reflect little joy in their actual births, and instead express her deepest desire:

And the Lord saw that Leah was hated, and He opened her womb; but Rachel was barren.

And Leah conceived, and bore a son, and she called his name Reuben: for she said, Because the Lord hath looked upon my affliction; for now my husband will love me.

And she conceived again, and bore a son, and said, Because the Lord hath heard that I am hated, he therefore has given me this son also: and she called his name Simeon.

And she conceived again and bore a son and said, Now this time will my husband be joined unto me, because I have borne him three sons: therefore was his name called Levi. (Genesis 29:31-34)

The names are now so famous that it is incredibly easy to overlook the profound pain that each of them

expresses. The first, *Reuven*, is literally in Hebrew, *reu-ben*, “Look, a son!” It is a way of stating to Jacob what she has achieved, hoping for his love. But the name of the second son highlights that her hopes were in vain: Simeon, *Shimon*, is *shama oni*, “that the Lord continued to hear my pain,” which did not dissipate after Reuben’s birth. The same can be said for the third son, Levi, which means attend, unintentionally predicting that the sons of Levi will ultimately attend the Lord in the Tabernacle and Temple. But for Leah, it is the attendance of her husband to her for which she hopes. Again, her dream is denied.

But suddenly, for some reason, something changes; not with her husband, but with herself. It is only upon the birth of her fourth child that Leah chooses a name that expresses not her own very legitimate yearnings, but rather gratitude to God:

And she conceived again, and bore a son and she said, This time I will thank the Lord: therefore she called his name Judah.
(Genesis 29:35)

The Hebrew here is “*bapa’am odeh laHashem*,” this time I will just express *hoda’ab*, thanksgiving, gratitude, to God. Therefore, she named him Judah, *Yebuda*, which means “thank God.” Here, no mention is made by Leah of Jacob, of spousal love. She merely recognizes a gift that has been given and engages in thanksgiving to the Divine source of that blessing. Leah’s gratitude reflects the fact that precisely because her life has so much pain, therefore she will be all the more cognizant, all the more grateful, for whatever blessings there are to be found.

This one word of gratitude, *Yebuda*, Judah, will forever become part of the Jewish psyche. For at a certain point, after the exile of the Ten Northern tribes, the descendants of Israel will take on the appellation *Yebudim*, Judah-ites, Jews. We are all *Yebuda*, even if we do not specifically descend from him or his tribe; this name Leah bestows in gratitude, will ultimately become *our* name.

We now understand the essence of the appellation *Yebudi*, Jew. To be a Jew is to be called to be grateful, and not in the perfunctory sense. The Hebrew for “thank you,” “*todab*,” comes from the word “*hoda’ab*,” meaning “giving thanks.” However, the word “*hoda’ab*” also means

confession. To be “*modeb*” can mean either expressing thanks or confessing in court. Rabbi Isaac Hutner has noted that in order for a person to give thanks, he has to also engage in confession. He has to admit that he is not self sufficient, and that based on earlier experience he had no reason, no right to truly expect the blessings suddenly bestowed. Every expression of true gratitude is also a confession.

How then could the Jews—the *Yebudim*—of New York, not embrace the national Thanksgiving that Washington declared? How could they not express gratitude to America? After all, Thanksgiving, as Seixas said, is particularly incumbent upon us as Jews. Indeed so, for we bear the memory of the many empires, perhaps embodied by the angels of Jacobs dream, that oppressed us. How could we not have embraced Thanksgiving, expressing gratitude joined with the confession that given our history we had no right to expect such a gift?

My own first Thanksgiving in Congregation Shearith Israel took place in the year when Thanksgiving and Hanukkah coincided, a moment known forever as “Thanksgivukah,” something that will not occur again for many, many thousands of years. In preparation for this event, I visited our synagogue’s archives to read the writings of generations past. There, I was shown the original, handwritten text of the sermon that Seixas delivered on Thanksgiving Day, 1789. As I held the precious pages of my predecessor, the barriers between past and present suddenly collapsed, and I felt a bond to that Jewish gratitude of so long ago, making my Thanksgiving in the present so much more meaningful both as an American and as a *Yebudi*, a Jew whose identity derives from gratitude. If gratitude is not a natural emotion in our age in America, it is perhaps because in contemporary culture we tend to see ourselves as individuals, self-sufficient, having no sense of history and feeling that everything is due to us.

The profound difference between Judah’s name and that of his brethren inspires us to consider the implications for the future of Israel, and ultimately for its very identity. When Rachel finally bears a child, the name that she bestows represents not joy in the moment, but aspirations for the future:

*And she called his name Joseph, saying,
May the Lord add to me another son.
(Genesis 30:24)*

Joseph, *Yosef*, meaning “he will increase,” is a prayer that the Almighty will add another child to her own branch of the family. It is a plaintive plea, and the name Joseph became a celebrated name among Jews and non-Jews.

Interestingly, among Americans, we find not only Joseph, but also the English equivalent: thus, Increase Mather, the prominent Puritan leader in Massachusetts Bay Colony. But if the most quintessentially American holiday is Thanksgiving, an act that rightly understood was born with Judah’s birth, then that reflects the fact that the legacy of the Bible, of the Hebraic tradition, is bound up with the history of this country, and it is surely at the heart of some of the most important moments in the Jewish relationship with America.

After World War II, upon the liberation of Europe, several rabbis and Jewish scholars living in DP camps asked the leaders of the American armed forces for help in publishing a copy of the Talmud, so that the Jewish survivors of the war could once again study the Jewish books of law they loved so much and which they had not seen for several years. One might have expected the Army to refuse this request. After all, their job was to secure the peace, not to go into the Jewish book business. Yet amazingly, the army agreed, believing that the preservation of Jewish civilization against totalitarian forces of evil was an essential embodiment of the American way. So, the Army requisitioned a printing plant in Heidelberg, which during the war had printed Nazi propaganda. In 1948, two years after the initial request, it published 500 sets of what is known today as “The Survivors’ Talmud” or “The U.S. Army Talmud.” The Jewish survivors in the camps, of course, had no right to expect the granting of this request, and it is therefore no surprise that these Jews added to the Talmud a preface, the work’s only words of English, which contains one of the most remarkable expressions of *hoda’ab*, of gratitude and thanksgiving, that I have ever seen. It reads:

This edition of the Talmud is dedicated to the United States Army. The Army played a major role in the rescue of the Jewish people from total annihilation, and their defeat of Hitler bore the major burden of sustaining the DPs of the Jewish faith. This special edition of the Talmud, published in the very land where, but a short time ago, everything Jewish and of Jewish inspiration was anathema, will remain a symbol of the indestructibility of the Torah. The Jewish DPs will never forget the generous impulses and the unprecedented humanitarianism of the American forces, to whom they owe so much.

The Bible asks us to be grateful, and to remember the gratitude of the past. That, in part, is why we Jews today are so proud to be named for Judah. May the study of the story of his birth make us ever grateful for the blessings in our own lives.

Discussion Questions:

1. The People of Israel are named for the patriarch who suffered more on his road to greatness than any other. Why might this be? What can the tumultuous life of Jacob/Israel teach the nation that bears his name?
2. The People of Israel are also known as *Yehudim*, Jews—people who, as Rabbi Soloveichik explains, are called to express *boda'ah*, gratitude. What is the relationship between these two aspects of Jewish identity: the reality of suffering on the journey of life and the imperative to be thankful for the unearned gifts we have received?