

Gratitude from the Torah

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Parashat Vayetze

What do We Learn from Lavan about the Current Ingratitude Epidemic?

Why Are We Experiencing a Gratitude Deficit?

Although I wasn't raised in a Torah-observant home, I was raised with many vital Jewish values, sadly lacking today even in Torah-observant homes. From a young age, my parents ingrained within my sisters and me the attitude of gratitude. We were taught to write thank you letters to anyone who gave us a gift. It was the old-fashioned kind of thank you that came with an envelope and a stamp, and that had to be brought to the mailbox! After the family dinner, no one was allowed to leave the dining room table before first saying "Thank you for the meal!" to Mom. This practice was extended to any host at any time and place. Today it takes little effort to write a WhatsApp with a thank you sticker, nevertheless, I know many people who are feeling unappreciated by their children and grandchildren. After spending much time, effort, and money to find the perfect birthday or Chanukah gift, they hardly receive a word of thanks. What is the reason for the current gratitude deficit that plagues the world, including Jewish communities whether Torah-observant or not? Is it because people lack the emotional tools to understand the connection between receiving a gift and expressing their thanks? Can people not comprehend the joy of connection when closing the circle by saying, "Thank you"? Psychologist Dr. Archibald Hart warns about the growing number of people who are increasingly unable to experience pleasure, which contributes to our cultural epidemic of ingratitude (Archibald Hart, 2007: *Thrilled to Death: How the Endless Pursuit of Pleasure Is Leaving Us Numb*). It seems that the main reason for our current ingratitude epidemic is the overflow of material prosperity. With so much great stuff in our lives, we find it harder and harder to feel pleasure in the little things. The more we have, the less grateful we are for what we have and what we get. Moreover, all the technological innovations with their plethora of engaging stimuli and activities, especially the smartphone, distracts people from being in touch with their feelings and diverts them from meaningful interaction and expressions of gratitude. As children and adults alike demand more and more, the attitude of entitlement spreads like wildfire. Gratitude is dwindling since material wealth cannot satiate the soul that longs for the material pleasures of this world. Our sages teach: "He who has 100 wants 200, and he who has 200 wants 400" (*Midrash Kohelet Rabbah* 3:13). Ingratitude is a result of always wanting more and never feeling satisfied. Our consumer society amplifies the dictum, "The pleasures of this world can be compared to a person who drinks salt water. It appears to him that he has quenched his thirst, but afterward he is even more thirsty" (Vilna Gaon, *Alim Letrufa*).

Ingratitude Toward Others Leads to Denial of Hashem's Kindness

What is gratitude and thankfulness? Where lies their source in the human psyche? And from where does ingratitude stem - a trait from which humanity suffers? Gratitude stems from a desire to be kind, which includes an inherent desire to act in kind to something that shows us kindness. Whereas gratitude derives from the 'giving' force, ingratitude is a result of the drive to take. People can be divided into 'givers' and 'takers.' The only desire of the 'giver' types is to do good and to give to others. Therefore, they feel a distaste for free gifts. When receiving something they will reflexively wish to 'give back.' If they are unable to do so, at the very least their heart will be full of gratitude which they generously express. But the 'taker' type wants everything for himself, whether by theft, deception, or gift, and in his heart, he will feel that the world is his and open for

his taking. When he receives something, he will never feel the need to repay anything at all. He has no recollection of having received it at all (Based on Rav Dessler, *Michtav M'Eliyahu*, volume I, p.46).

The Hebrew word תִּדְהָ/ *todah* both means thank you and admitting. Saying “thank you” is admitting our indebtedness to someone who did us a favor or gave us a present. Perhaps the growing insecurity and lack of self-confidence we experience in our time make us shy away from the humiliating feeling of owing thanks to anyone. Yet, a basic tenet of Judaism is to recognize how everything we have – including our lives – are undeserved G-d-given gifts. Thus, to serve Hashem properly we must uproot all remnants of ungratefulness from our psyche and deepen our feelings of gratitude. Therefore, we must hone and refine the character trait of gratitude and extend it to everyone and everything from the Almighty Creator who continually bestows us with kindness to the inanimate rock that helped us climb the mountain. The importance of developing an appreciation of anything that benefits us in any way is the core of the prohibition of waste. When we refrain from showing gratitude, and in the case of the inanimate – ruins it – we are directly ruining our own inborn trait of gratitude. The ruination of the fundamentally Jewish concept of gratitude will eventually lead to the collapse of all moral and Jewish values. As it states, “One who denies his friend’s kindness will eventually deny his Creator’s kindness” (Rabbenu Bachaya, *Shemot* 1:8).

Lavan’s Attitude of Ingratitude and Entitlement

Lavan personifies ingratitude. Before Ya’acov arrived, Lavan only had daughters and limited means, this is why he had to use his beautiful daughter Rachel as a shepherd. As soon as Ya’acov came, Lavan was immediately blessed with sons as well as with tremendous prosperity. (*Tanchuma Shemot* 16); (Rashi, *Bereishit* 30:27). Yet, the entire time, he treated Ya’acov without care (See *Bereishit* 31:38-41 with Rashi). When Ya’acov finally left, Lavan even tried to kill him, as we learn from the words of G-d to Lavan, “Beware of attempting anything with Ya’acov, good or bad” (*Bereishit* 31:24). G-d would not have warned Lavan against harming Ya’acov, had Lavan not intended to do so. Nevertheless, he came with his sons – who were only given to Lavan in Ya’acov’s merit – to kill him. Thus, the Alshich refers to Lavan as the epitome of an ingrate (*Shoshanat Amukim, Shir HaShirim* 6:5-8).

ספר בראשית פרק לא פסוק מג

וַיַּעַן לָבָן וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל יַעֲקֹב הַבָּנוֹת בְּנֹתַי וְהַבָּנִים בְּנֵי וְהַצֹּאן צִאֲנִי וְכָל אֲשֶׁר אֵתָּה רְאָה לִי הוּא...

“Lavan answered and said to Ya’acov, “The daughters are my daughters, and the sons are my sons, and the animals are my animals, and all that you see is mine...” (*Bereishit* 31:43)

In Lavan’s eyes, everything was his. He knew no other way. A corrupt person feels everything belongs to him, and that which is not his own – is merely not yet. He owes nothing to anyone, and as the famous saying goes – “nothing is more comfortable than a clean conscience.” This is the polar opposite of everything a Jew strives for, and we must distance ourselves from this character trait. This phenomenon of ingratitude is Lavan’s inheritance bequeathed in full measure to the general non-Jewish world. The Jew may be elevated, exploited, rewarded, or persecuted but rarely if ever is he truly appreciated. The world has a mental block against truly recognizing the role of the Jew in the progress of civilization. In our current world, that mental block has been extended to focus mainly on the Jewish state of Israel (Rabbi Berel Wein). We look forward to the day – may it be real soon – when “They shall neither harm nor destroy on all My holy mount, for the world shall be

full of the knowledge of Hashem as water covers the seabed" (*Yesha'yahu* 11:9).

Gratitude Focus for the Week of Parashat Vayetze

Rocks constitute a main theme of *Parashat Vayetze*. The word אֶבֶן/*even* - 'rock' is mentioned no less than eleven times in this week's parasha, in three different sections. Each time the rocks connect with Ya'acov in miraculous ways, The first one plays its part in Ya'acov's famous dream. As he prepares to sleep, he takes some rocks for his headrest as it states, "Ya'acov approached, he arrived at the place and lodged there because the sun had set, and he took some of the rocks of the place and placed [them] at his head, and he lay down in that place" (*Bereishit* 28:11). Yet when Ya'acov awakes the rocks had become one rock as it states, "He took the rock [in the singular] that he had placed at his head, and he set it up as a monument, and he poured oil on top of it" (*Bereishit* 28:18). Rashi explains that since all the rocks wanted to be the one upon which Ya'acov would rest his head, Hashem made a miracle that they became one rock. The second instance where a rock is mentioned is when Ya'acov first met Rachel and "rolled off the rock from upon the mouth of the well and watered the sheep of Lavan..." (*Bereishit* 29:10). Hashem granted him miraculous strength to remove the heavy rock that normally needed a large group of men to unroll together, "as one who removes a cork from a bottle, to let you know that he possessed great strength (Rashi *ibid.*). The rocks also follow Ya'acov in Chapter 31 in his wise dealing with the animosity of Lavan and his sons, describing the covenant that Ya'acov made with Lavan after he miraculously managed to assuage them. The covenant of peace is symbolized and commemorated by a monument made of a pile of rocks, as it states, "So Ya'acov took a rock and set it up [as] a monument. Then Ya'acov said to his kinsmen, gather rocks, and they took rocks and made a pile, and they ate there by the pile. Lavan called it Yegar Sahadutha, but Ya'acov called it Gal Ed. And Lavan said, "This pile is a witness between me and you today..." (*Bereishit* 31:45-48). All this inspired me to share some gratitude exercises that involve rocks.

- **Notice how Feelings of Discomfort Naturally Make the Little Goodies go Unnoticed** – Try taking a group of children or adults on a hike and ask them to place a pebble in their shoe, positioning it in a place that is causing the least amount of discomfort. Pass out mints to each participant. At the end of the hike discuss the experience with the participants. You may learn that mint has gone unnoticed. Ask the participants if complaining made the situation easier. (Powerful lesson on complaining right there!) The lesson gleaned from this exercise is that life is full of difficulties and also full of sweet blessings. On which will you focus? Sometimes we hone in so tightly on the rock in our shoe, that we completely miss the enjoyment of the mint in our mouth. Don't miss it! Rocks and mints are definitely part of everyone's journey.
- **Make A Gratitude Rock** – What is a gratitude rock? A gratitude rock is a small stone that fits in your pocket or on your desk. Decorate it with a word, phrase, or design that is calming and reminds you to be grateful! Make it unique to you by choosing a word or phrase to fill in the blank: When I'm grateful, I am also _____. Ex: When I'm grateful, I am also joyful!
- Here are the steps to making your own gratitude rock! **Find a small rock!** – Hunt for a small to medium stone in your backyard, front yard, or on a neighborhood walk.
- **Chose Materials to Decorate Your Rock** – You can use a permanent marker, paint, or paint markers
- **Choose the Word to Describe Your Gratitude** – (filled in the blank with above).
- **Decorate your Rock** – with dots, swirls, flowers, and more. Be creative!

- **How to use your gratitude rock?** You can keep your rock in your pocket, at your desk, or even on your bedside table.
- **If you feel anxious, worried, or down, hold your rock,** take 5 deep breaths, and repeat your word. Repeat until you feel your energy shift to a calmer state. Then say or think of three things you are grateful for.
- **You can hold your rock daily while you practice mindfulness.** Set a time for 5-10 minutes. Close your eyes and each time you breathe in, repeat your word to yourself (silent or out loud). End with your gratitude list.
- **Starting a daily mindfulness practice** is good for your brain health and processing emotions! Start small - 5 minutes the first week, 10 minutes the second week, and so on until you reach 20 or 30 minutes!