

Gratitude from the Torah

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Parashat Vayechi

How do We Learn from Yosef to Walk the Path of Forgiveness by Focusing on Gratitude?

Gratitude for the Personal Miracle of My Life Being Saved During Car Accident

More than 30 years ago I was in a traumatic car accident. I was taking my son to check out the yeshiva in Yishuv Ma'aleh Amos, where the streets were narrow with sharp curves. Since I was afraid to tumble down the mountain slope, I didn't drive all the way to the edge of the road. As a result, I underwent a frontal collision with an Arab dump truck. Our car was totaled and it's quite a miracle that my son was completely unscathed without breaking even as much as a hair. Although I can't say it wasn't painful, I'm forever grateful that I got away with only breaking my knee. Perhaps you may think it was another miracle that the Arabs in the dumb truck helped me get an ambulance, instead of finishing me off, G-d forbid. I was later told that this is typical, as Arabs have inherited part of Avraham's chesed and they are especially kind to those who are injured and vulnerable. Yet a small miracle it certainly was that my life was spared during that car accident that could have been fatal. I recall being visited in the hospital by two elderly holy women who looked to me like shiny angels, due to my post-surgery narcotic state. When I asked them, "Teach me to feel love of G-d, they replied, "Think about how much Hashem loves you!" How could I not feel Hashem's love for me, when He protected me to come out almost all in one piece after such a scary car accident? I'm so grateful that Hashem spared my life, and it strengthened me to feel His love, and that He wants me to remain in this world to accomplish a mission. It is not surprising that only three years later I started Midreshet B'erot Bat Ayin.

The Halacha of Reciting the Blessing "...Who Performed a Miracle for me in this Place"

I am not sure why I never returned to the place of the accident to recite the blessing, "*Baruch Ata Hashem Elokeinu Melech Ha'olam she'asa li nes bamakom hazeh.*" (Blessed are you Hashem our G-d, King of the Universe who performed a miracle for me in this place). We must make this bracha when seeing a place where the miracle happened to us (*Shulchan Aruch O.C. 218:4, Mishna Berurah 218:7, Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 60:8*). This halacha is learned from the Talmud stating that anytime we pass a location where a miracle happened to us, we must recite the abovementioned blessing. The Gemara recounts an incident where a person was walking on the southern edge of the Euphrates River when he was attacked by a lion. Miraculously, he was saved. When this individual later told Rava what had occurred, Rava told him that every time he passed the southern edge of the Euphrates River, he must recite the "...*she'asa li nes*" blessing. (*Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 54a*). We see from the above that we must thank Hashem for the miracles He performs for us every day. This is especially true regarding occurrences that are out of the ordinary. However, lesser miracles such as falling onto train tracks and escaping several seconds before an oncoming train passes or being present in a place where there is gunfire without being hit by the bullets, we may not recite the "...*She'asa li nes*" blessing since these deliverances could be explained as natural occurrences (Maran Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, *Halacha Yomit*, 29 Tishrei 5780). It seems that my car accident, as scary as it felt, could be compared to the above examples of lesser miracles. Indeed, "If a person was in a car accident – even if the car flipped over several times – and he was saved, he shouldn't recite this bracha with Hashem's name (*Yalkut Yosef* 218)

Rav Ovadia holds that someone who survived a terrorist attack of being stabbed recites this bracha without Hashem's name. This is because we're concerned about the opinion of Shulchan Aruch that one only recites the bracha for a supernatural miracle (*Halacha Berurah* 218:19). I also noticed that both the Talmud and the halachic sources state that we must recite the blessing upon passing or seeing the place of the miracle, without obligating us to purposely return to the place of the miracle. I didn't recite a blessing in that place even without Hashem's name since I didn't pass by the same place later on. Being so filled with gratitude, I still would like to take a trip to that place (this time with my husband in the driver's seat) to recite the blessing without Hashem's name. Perhaps it's not too late!?

Expressing Gratitude to Replace Revenge Seeking

The midrash tells us that after Ya'acov was buried, Yosef did not hurry back to Egypt from Chevron. As they were returning from the burial of their father in the Machpelah (Cave of the Patriarchs), the brothers saw Yosef journey to the north of Canaan, to Dotan, to the site where they had thrown him into a pit before selling him. He wanted to see that pit before returning to Egypt to thank Hashem for saving his life by reciting the blessing "Blessed be the place where He performed a miracle for me," just as any person is required to pronounce a blessing at the place where a miracle had been performed on his behalf. The brothers inferred from this that Yosef was going back in time to that period when the tension between them was high, leading to the terrible act of throwing him into a pit and selling him (*Midrash Tanchuma* 17:5). This made them fear what was to come:

ספר בראשית פרק נ פסוק טו ויראו אחי יוסף כי מת אביהם ויאמרו לו ישטמנו יוסף והשב ושיב לנו את כל הרעה אשר גמלנו אתו: (טז) ויצו אל יוסף לאמר אביך צוה לפני מותו לאמר: (יז) כה תאמרו ליוסף אנא שא נא פשע אחיך וחסאתם כי רעה גמלוך ועתה שא נא לפשע עבדי אלהי אביך ויבך יוסף בדברם אליו: (יח) וילכו גם אחיו ויפלו לפניו ויאמרו הננו לך לעבדים: (יט) ויאמר אליהם יוסף אל תיראו כי התחת אלהים אני: (כ) ואתם חשבתם עלי רעה אלהים חשבה לטובה למען עשה כיום הזה להחית עם רב: (כא) ועתה אל תיראו אנכי אכלכל אתכם ואת טפכם וינחם אותם וידבר על לבם:

"Now Yosef's brothers saw that their father had died, and they said, 'Perhaps Yosef will hate us and return to us all the evil that we did to him.' So, they commanded [messengers to go] to Yosef, to say, 'Your father commanded [us] before his death, saying, So shall you say to Yosef, Please, forgive now your brothers' transgression and their sin, for they did evil to you. Now please forgive the transgression of the servants of the G-d of your father.' Yosef wept when they spoke to him. His brothers also went and fell before him, and they said, 'Behold, we are your slaves.' But Yosef said to them, 'Don't be afraid, for am I instead of G-d? Indeed, you intended evil against me, [but] G-d designed it for good, to accomplish what is now being done, to save the lives of many people. So now do not fear. I will sustain you and your small children.' So, he comforted them and spoke to their hearts" (*Bereishit* 50:15-21).

The brothers interpreted Yosef's recalling of the attempted murder by his own brothers as a reason for planning revenge. However, Yosef went to the pit to remember the miracle that happened to him when his brothers left him in the pit to die. Rather than plotting revenge, Yosef was focused on gratitude to G-d for saving him and he wanted to express gratitude for this miracle.

Reversing Negative Effects of Passed Traumas through Gratitude

The brothers mistakenly assumed – or feared – that Yosef's visiting the place of the pit would

reignite his past trauma. They were concerned that even if the passage of time had healed the wounds they inflicted, these wounds were now opened anew by the memories that flooded Yosef's mind as he stood next to that pit. Therefore, they feared that he would now seek revenge. Yet, Yosef's recollection of being thrown into the pit did not rekindle his trauma and anger, it rather reinforced his profound sense of gratitude. He returned to the pit to express gratitude to G-d for saving him and lifting him up from the pit to the position of Egyptian vizier. Memories of negative experiences can have two opposite emotional effects. On the one hand, they can reignite the trauma and rage that the person felt at the time of the event. Alternatively, revisiting such experiences can enhance our appreciation for how far we have come. Rather than holding on to past suffering, we have an opportunity to focus on the good fortune we enjoy now. The Midrash calls upon us to turn painful memories of the past into sources of joy and gratitude, instead of sources of frustration and rage. Rather than focusing on the angst and anger caused by negative events, we must recall how, with G-d's help, we recovered and progressed. By reflecting on past events from this perspective, even upsetting memories can bring us happiness and satisfaction, as they will remind us of how much we now have to be grateful for (Rav David Silverberg, *Torat Har Etzion VBM, SALT - Parashat Vayechi* 5781 / 2020). Yosef's story ends with a message from Yosef that echoed throughout his life: Instead of focusing on accusing others, we must focus on gratitude to G-d. A life of gratitude rather than of accusations leads to forgiveness and making peace with others and will ultimately repair any relationship (Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz, *Rabbi of the Western Wall and Holy Sites, Parashat Vayechi – 5783, Accusation or Gratitude: A Message from Joseph*).

Gratitude Focus for the Week of Parashat Vayechi

I have a very beloved person in my life who is very kind and always gives me beautiful thought-out gifts. However, she falls short in working out interpersonal problems between us, learning, and growing from conflict-solving. When you are close with someone things are apt to come up between you, which offers beautiful opportunities to learn from one another – to rectify and become rectified. Since I'm a person who despises small talk but yearns to go deeply into the underpinnings of interpersonal challenges, it is very painful for me when a beloved person refuses to join me in this endeavor. Yet even if true reconciliation barely can take place without airing out the pain to clear it, we must learn from Yosef to let go of the pain by focusing on the good. Therefore, I choose to accept this beloved person with her strengths and weaknesses and focus on being grateful for her gifts.

- Work on Forgiving Loved Ones by Focusing on their Gifts – Sometimes, we get hurt by people who have benefitted us so much and we tend to focus more on not forgiving the harm than showing gratitude for the benefits received. This meditation can help:

Meditation to Shift the Pain of Unforgiveness Through Gratitude

- Close your eyes and pay attention to your breath. Take slow and deep inhalations through your nose, and exhale fully through your mouth with your tongue gently touching your pallet, making a shhhhhhhh sound. Repeat this breathing sequence four times.
- Allow yourself to bring up the pain inflicted by your loved one to your consciousness. What did she do or say that was so painful? What exactly makes it cause you to feel all this pain? Examine the pain as if it belonged to someone else. Is it constant or off and on? Is it sharp, or dull? Is it hard or slimy? Can you give the pain a color? Where in the body does it reside?
- Place your hands on the part of the body where you feel that the pain between you and your loved one resides. On a scale from 1-10, what number of intensity would you give this pain?

Breathe into the pain and allow it to be. Accept your pain, it is part of life, no pain, no gain!

- You may have carried this pain for a long time. Ask yourself if you still need this pain. Ask your body if it's safe for you to let go of this pain. If you get a "no" answer, ask your body why, and see if you can assuage your body to allow you to let go of the pain.
- Now allow yourself to give your pain over to Hashem. Use your hands to scoop your pain out of your body and upward, while imagining that you are giving your pain over to Hashem, letting go, letting G-d, Keep breathing into your pain and gradually become aware of how it's slowly releasing.
- Check if the intensity of your pain has lessened on the scale from 1-10. If it has, mentally thank Hashem for this relief!
- Now focus on the benefits you have gained from your loved one. Allow yourself to feel the pleasure of the gifts she has given you. You may focus on one specific gift that has given you special pleasure. While it is much more natural to focus on the bad, let's try to ask similar questions about the pleasure your loved one has given you.
- What did she give you that made you so happy? What exactly causes you to feel all this pleasure? Is this good feeling constant or off and on? Can you strengthen and amplify this loving feeling? Is it sweet or fragrant? Is it a soft or fuzzy feeling? Does your feeling of joy have a color? Where in the body does it reside?
- Place your hands on the place in your body where your joy especially resides and see if you can breathe this joy into other parts of your body. Breathe your joy into your heart! Breathe it into your head! Breathe this pleasure into your stomach and all the way down to your toes. Become aware of how your entire body is tingling with pleasure.
- "Remove evil through doing good!" (*Tehillim* 34:15) – Remove grudges through gratitude. Perhaps now it would be difficult to even feel the pain caused by what your loved one had done or said against you. When you try to examine its number on a scale from 1-10 you may find that the pain has almost totally subsided.
- Yeah! You are succeeding in shifting your pain of unforgiveness by focusing on your gratitude. You are accepting your loved one's weakness, as we all know that no one is perfect. Now you can begin to experience how your loved one's gifts outweigh the pain she has caused you. You are finally on the path to total forgiveness!
- Forgiveness begins with recognizing we're all human and it is human to err. Forgiveness is a gift to yourself. Forgiveness clears your mind of doubts, worries, and distractions, and restores your sanity and peace of mind. Thank Hashem for the gift of forgiveness!