

SEDER NIGHT: THE ULTIMATE GRATITUDE INTERVENTION



PSYCHED FOR TORAH - PESACH 2019/5779
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Psychological research demonstrates that gratitude is correlated with a host of positive outcomes related to well-being, including self-esteem, positive affect, life-satisfaction, optimism, and positive relationships, amongst others.¹ Because it is related to all of these beneficial concepts there are a number of interventions that psychologists use to boost a person's gratitude. One is called the gratitude list, in which participants are asked to write down three good things that went well each day. Another is called the gratitude visit, in which participants are asked to write and deliver a letter of gratitude to someone they haven't properly thanked.² Upon weaving together various Torah sources, I would like to argue that the seder can be viewed as a systematic gratitude intervention.

The theme of gratitude as it relates to Pesach is first introduced in the beginning of Shemos when a "new" Pharaoh that did not know Yosef is introduced (1:8). The Midrash (Midrash Sechel Tov Shemos 1:8) assumes that this really was the same Pharaoh as before, but he acted as if he did not know Yosef. He was ungrateful - a kafui tov - for all of the kindness that Yosef did for him. The Midrash continues that anyone who is ungrateful to man, will become ungrateful to God, as Pharaoh, who once acknowledged God (Bereishis 41:28), later said "I do not know God" (Shemos 5:20).

In contrast to the previous Midrash that identifies ungratefulness as Pharaoh's tragic flaw, the following Midrash indicates that Moshe was required to demonstrate a high level of gratitude before taking the Jews out of Egypt. The pasuk says that Hashem told Moshe to tell Aharon to stretch out his hand and turn the water into blood (Shemos 7:19). Why didn't Hashem tell Moshe to do it himself? Rabbi Tanchum constructs a didactic conversation where Hashem instructs Moshe that "The water that protected you when you were thrown in the river should not be struck by your hand" (Shemos Rabbah, Vaeira 10).

¹ For a complete review, see Wood A, Froh J, Geraghty A. Gratitude and well-being: A review and theoretical integration. *Clinical Psychology Review*. November 2010;30(7):890-905.

² Seligman, M. E., Steen, T. A., Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2005). Positive psychology progress: empirical validation of interventions. *American Psychologist*, 60(5), 410.

By Moshe modeling this lesson to Bnei Yisrael, the goal was to prepare them for the ultimate objective of Yetziyas Mitzrayim, as highlighted by Ibn Ezra. The pasuk, which we may recognize from the Haggadah, states, “When your son asks you in the future, ‘What are the testimonies, statutes and ordinances which Hashem our God has commanded you?’ Then you should say to your son: ‘We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt; and Hashem brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand’” (Devarim 6:20-21). Ibn Ezra explains that the son wants to know why do only Jews have to follow mitzvos - didn't Hashem create all humanity? The parent replies, that it is because of our debt of gratitude to Hashem for His great kindness in taking us out of Egypt that we are obligated to perform mitzvos. Cultivating the trait of gratitude is essential to being freed from Mitzrayim as it is the foundation for keeping Torah and mitzvos.

With this in mind, we can explain why the Haggadah uses the text of “Arami oved avi” (“A wandering Aramean tried to destroy my ancestor”) as its central text. These pesukim are borrowed from the brief recap of Yetziyas Mitzrayim one recited while bringing Bikkurim (see Devarim 26:5-9). Wouldn't it make more sense to use a “primary” source from pesukim directly recorded during Yetziyas Mitzrayim? Perhaps the Baal Haggadah is alluding to the fact that just like the essence of Bikkurim is gratitude (see Sefer Hachinuch, 606), so too the essence of the Haggadah is gratitude (see Daas Chochma U'Mussar 1:125).

Besides for this implicit message behind the chosen text, there are other elements in the Haggadah that emphasize gratitude. Dayeinu, which accentuates the importance of being grateful for every step in a process, is a type of gratitude list. Additionally, right before we express our gratitude through Hallel, we read that in every generation we should envision that we ourselves are leaving Egypt. Lefichach - therefore - the Haggadah tells us, we are obligated to “thank, praise, laud, glorify, exalt, honor, bless, extol and adore” Hashem for performing these miracles for our forefathers and for ourselves. True gratitude is felt when it is personal. Since gratitude is so essential to Pesach, it is imperative at the seder that each one of us has a personalized Yetziyas Mitzrayim experience.

From this perspective, the seder can be viewed as a communal gratitude visit. In the presence of family and friends, we take our letter of gratitude in the form of the Haggadah and read it to Hashem. We thank Hashem for the great miracles that he performed for our ancestors and continues to perform for us daily. As we express our profound gratitude to Hashem this Pesach, may we merit to add to the list of things to be grateful for, the ability to celebrate Pesach in Yerushalayim with the building of the Beis Hamikdash, bimheira beyameinu.

(Originally published in the Jewish Echo, 2015)

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