

SPIRITUAL GRATITUDE



PSYCHED FOR TORAH - PARSHAT LECH LECHA
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If my friend is gracious enough to give me a twenty-dollar bill as a present, my gratitude would appropriately be directed at him. Yet, if I happen to find a twenty-dollar bill on the street, to whom should I direct my gratitude?

For those who aren't particularly spiritual or religious, finding money on the street may engender positive emotions, but gratitude would likely be absent, as there is nobody to thank. For those who have a belief in G-d, however, such fortunate experiences could lend themselves to being grateful to G-d. The fact that a religious individual has more opportunities to feel and express gratitude is one of the reasons Dr. David Rosmarin and colleagues hypothesized, tested, and found that religious individuals would reap the positive benefits associated with gratitude—such as increased well-being—above and beyond the advantages associated with general gratitude.

Taking the twenty-dollar bill example one step further, we can add an additional layer of reflection. From a religious perspective, even if my friend gives me a twenty-dollar bill, my gratitude to him should be supplemented with an additional gratitude towards G-d. Meaning, every benefit accrued socially should also be attributed to G-d's providence and beneficence. The question becomes, who to thank first: your friend or G-d?

After Avram helped the five kings defeat the four kings, Malki-Tzedek, king of Shalem, who was also the “priest of G-d Most High,” brings out bread and water for Avram and his soldiers (Bereishit 14:18). As an expression of gratitude, Malki-Tzedek blesses Avram to G-d Most High, Creator of heaven and earth (14:19) and afterwards blesses G-d, “Who has delivered your foes into your hand” (14:20). The Gemara (Nedarim 32b) critiques his priorities. He should have blessed G-d before he blessed Avram as first one blesses the Master, and only afterwards the servant. As a result of his error, G-d removed the privilege of priesthood from Malki-Tzedek and bestowed it upon Avram.

Ibn Ezra provides an alternative approach and suggests that Malki-Tzedek’s order of blessing is appropriate: First he should bless Avram, acknowledging that he saved the captives, and only afterwards bless Hashem, who aided Avram in his quest. Rabbi Soloveitchik adds a fascinating approach to explain Malki-Tzedek’s reasoning. G-d, as it were, requires man’s assistance in revealing His presence in the world. Avram’s job was to spread G-d’s message in a world where He was obscured by idol-worship. It is specifically through Avram’s success that G-d would be blessed. The blessing to Avram also functioned as a blessing to G-d.

While the different approaches may disagree on who should be blessed first, the resonating message is important in either case. There is a purposefully blurred line between gratitude to others and gratitude to G-d. When others do us a kindness, we should not limit our gratitude to the interpersonal realm. We must expand our expression of gratitude to G-d as well. The person doing the chesed is acting as an emissary of G-d, making His name great and revealed in this world. In addition, we must acknowledge that it is G-d’s providence that allowed for the kindness to happen.

By transforming all our interpersonal gratitude experiences to incorporate a Divine element, may we merit additional spiritual and psychological well-being, above and beyond what is generally associated with being grateful people.

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