

GRATEFUL THINKING



PSYCHED FOR TORAH - PARSHAT EKEV
RABBI DR. MORDECHAI SCHIFFMAN

Dr. Jeffrey Froh, a psychologist at Hofstra University, is one of the leading gratitude researchers in the country. As part of his quest to increase levels of gratitude in students, he designed a curriculum that helps develop the thought processes people have in relation to gratitude. He delineates three “grateful thinking” strategies that can enhance the experience of gratitude. The first is to consider the intent of the benefactor. The second is to take into account the cost incurred by the benefactor. The third is that the recipient contemplates the extent of the benefits that he or she accrued. Middle school students in his research study that were taught this curriculum and practiced thinking about these three components, had increased gratitude, increased well-being, and exhibited more gratitude behaviors than students in a control group.

Over the course of his farewell address to Bnei Yisrael, Moshe was intent on making them aware of two potential dangers lurking once they entered the land of Israel. The first was external. Bnei Yisrael should beware of the other cultures and nations around them. Those nations’ debasement, primarily framed in terms of idol worship, could leak out and impact Bnei Yisrael to the point where Bnei Yisrael could potentially reject G-d and Torah. The second was internal. Material success could lead to arrogance, and arrogance to the forgetting of G-d. “Your heart will become haughty and you will forget (“*veshachachta*”) the Lord, your G-d, who took you out of Egypt” (*Devarim* 8:14). The *pesukim* continue the list of things besides the Exodus Bnei Yisrael will forget: that G-d guided and protected them in the desert, and that he conducted miracles to provide them food and water. The remedy for external dangers is to reject the foreign cultures. Is the antidote to arrogance to discourage material wealth?

This solution hardly seems likely from the context. The promise of the land of Israel has always been framed within the context of material wealth – after all, it is the land that flows with milk and honey. What then is the corrective course of action to prevent the arrogance that seems to flow from economic success? Perhaps the answer is embedded in a reinterpretation of the *pasuk* above. The letter “vov” of “*veshachachta*” can mean either *and* or *because*. Instead of reading it that “Your heart will become haughty *and* you will forget the Lord,” we can read it, “Your heart will become haughty *because* you will forget the Lord.” Forgetting and ingratitude serve as the intervening variables that stand in between material success and arrogance. Success is not the cause of arrogance and lack of success is not the salve. Rather, arrogance is rooted in forgetting, and forgetting in ingratitude.

Ibn Ezra colors in the forgotten emotional experience behind these historical events. They will forget how lowly of spirit they were when they were slaves, before G-d saved them. They will forget the pain and suffering they experienced in the desert, before G-d provided the miracles. Rabbi Mordechai Gifter (Pirkei Emunah, p. 74) expands on Ibn Ezra’s comments and finds an essential lesson to help deepen our experience of gratitude: When G-d or another person does something that benefits us, it is insufficient to just say thank you. True gratitude requires “grateful thinking” as well. We must contemplate the essence of the good that was bestowed upon us. Consequently, we are required to reflect on the situation that we were in before we received the benefit. This is the only way to fully appreciate the depths of the gratitude owed. Moshe was cautioning Bnei Yisrael not to forget the good G-d has and will perform, which requires them to meditate on the pain and suffering that they encountered before being saved.

To protect against the arrogance that material success can bring, we need to be grateful. Yet, we cannot fulfill our obligation of gratitude with a quick and trite thank you. If we want to truly experience gratitude we need to step back and analyze using “grateful thinking” strategies. To fully appreciate what we have, we must vividly recall the lack we experienced before we received that benefit. By working on this cognitive exercise, we can deepen our thankfulness to G-d for all He provides and enhance our gratefulness to those around us who enrich our lives.

RABBI DR. MORDECHAI SCHIFFMAN

PsychedForTorah.com

PsychedForTorah@gmail.com

[@PsychedForTorah](https://www.instagram.com/PsychedForTorah)

