



**Gratitude/Thanksgiving in Times of Economic Crisis:
Some Thoughts/Pointers for Clergy Seeking to Help**

Rabbi Simkha Y. Weintraub, LCSW, November 2009

- 1. Presence:** We do not, of course, insensitively insist (or even immediately instruct) that people “count their blessings” when they are in the midst of experiencing or expressing lack, want, deprivation, anxiety, despair, etc. The first step, as always, is deep, respectful, and supportive presence.

- 2. Our Inventory:** ...And yet, it behooves us, as helpers, to consider the blessings a person still has – how/where they are, or can be, still ‘whole’ – what they have inside themselves or as part of our communities, even if these are ‘intangibles.’ In other words, in our approaching this person or family, we should be aware and take inventory of their resources/resilience – and name these in our minds. (See “Seven Dimensions of Resilience/Resources,” below) We do not want to throw the baby out with the bathwater!

- 3. Our Own Thanks:** It starts with us. The helper must come in touch with his/her basic, enduring sense of Gratitude.. Do your own inventory on several dimensions: physical/material, familial/interpersonal, emotional/psychological, cultural/societal, spiritual/religious. Continue until you sense that the balance sheet is at least ‘even,’ if not heavily tilted in favor of the “*What I Have*” side.

- 4. And not just words:** Experience is key. To know gratitude is to feel it. Pause for a moment right after *Birkhot HaShahar* or *Birkat HaMazon*, and find a blessing, in the moment, that you enjoy and for which you express sincere gratitude. It may be a breeze, a sound, silence, an image, a scent, a warm memory, a relationship...or several blessings.

- 5. Modim Anakhnu: Collective Gratitude:** We understand and respect how any individual, given their state of wallet and spirit, may not feel filled with gratitude or moved to express thanks. But we do not only have our lonely, solo voices – we speak as well as an historic, living, eternal collective. As a community, Jews have survived numerous economic crises – uncertainty, collapse, dislocation, etc. – over the centuries. Many of the morning *b'rakhot* catalogue shared blessings that the community, society, and even all humanity may articulate as a collective, even if some/many do not, at a particular juncture, feel them. It may help someone to both acknowledge their lacks but also explore the remarkable resources of our collective – such as *Connect-to-Care*.

- 6. Relationship:** All of this, of course, suggests that Connection is of the essence – for people to access Gratitude, connectedness to others, to the community, to Israel, to America, to humankind, to nature, to God – hopefully to many of these, is critical. Reaffirmation of place, value, role, even in incremental ways, rekindles Gratitude, warms up stiff thankfulness muscles.

- 7. Texts as Pointers/Gifts:** Though we do not want to, in any heavy-handed way, load people down with sources when they are alienated or oppressed, sharing an inspiring or thought-provoking text in an open, inquiring way can provide them with helpful direction, uplifting inspiration, and/or useful distraction. You might want to survey what follows, and select from them as needed in counseling, teaching, group discussion, etc.

Gratitude/Thanksgiving:
Some 18 Jewish Sources for Strength, Struggle, and Growth

I. Gratitude as the Essence of ‘Judah’ and Judaism – Our Heritage/Our Legacy:

ותהר עוד ותלד בן ותאמר הפעם אודה את-ה' העל-כן קראָה שְׁמוֹ יְהוּדָה

35. And she conceived again, and bore a son; and she said, “Now will I thank/praise the Lord;” therefore she called his name “Judah”... *Genesis 29:35*

II. The Sole Surviving Sacrifice in the Future: Gratitude as Eternal:

ז רבי פנחס ורבי לוי ורבי יוחנן בשם ר' מנחם דגליא לעתיד לבא כל הקרבנות בטלין וקרבן תודה אינו בטל כל התפלות בטלות ההודאה אינה בטלה

7. R. Phinehas and R. Levi and R. Johanan said in the name of R. Menahem of Gallia: In the Time-to-Come all sacrifices will be annulled, but that of Thanksgiving will not be annulled, and all prayers will be annulled, but [that of] Thanksgiving will not be annulled.
Midrash Vayikra/Leviticus Rabbah 9:7 (Tzav)

III. Locating/Naming our many blessings/resources every day:

R. Meir used to say, A man is bound to say one hundred blessings daily...
Babylonian Talmud, Menahot 43b

IV. Starting the day with Gratitude for the restoration of soul/spirit/consciousness:

Modeh Ani

I am grateful in Your Presence,
King, Alive, Eternal One,
for restoring, within me, my soul with love,
filled with Your eternal trust.
Recited upon wakending each day

V. Every day, every generation: Collective Affirmation of Gratitude:

Modim Anakhnu Lakh/We are thankful to You
that You are HaShem, our God and God of our ancestors
eternally, throughout all time!
You are the Rock of our lives, the Shield of our salvation,
You are this One.
In every generation we thank You, we recount Your praise --
for our lives which are in Your Hand,
for our souls which are in Your Care,
for Your miracles which are with us every day,
and for Your wonders and kindnesses that are always there,
evening, morning, and noontime.
Beneficent One -- Your mercy never runs out!
Compassionate One -- Your lovingkindnesses never cease!
Eternally--Our hope is in You.
From the daily Amidah prayer

VI. Even in rough, challenging times, can we precede our petition with praise?

Rav Simlai expounded: A person should always first recount the praise of the Holy Blessed One, and (only) then pray (for his needs/desires.)

Babylonian Talmud, B'rakhot 32a

VII. Who must offer Thanksgiving prayers?

R. Pinhas said: In time to come, all voluntary sacrifices will be abolished, except those of thanksgiving.”

R. Judah in the name of Rav said:, “Four should offer thanksgiving prayers:

Those who have landed safely after a sea-voyage...

Those who have returned from desert travel...

Those who have recovered from a serious illness,

And those who have been liberated from prison...:*

*Babylonian Talmud, B'rakhot 54b (*see Psalm 107)*

VIII. “Amen”: Affirming Gratitude is Expressing Gratitude

R. Judah, after recovering from illness,
was visited by Rav Hanan of Baghdad and other rabbis.

They said: “Blessed by the Compassionate One, who gave you to us and not the earth!”

He said, “Amen.”

And then he said to them: My response is sufficient to fulfill the duty of thanksgiving.”

Babylonian Talmud, B'rakhot 54b

IX. Discerning blessings in society; Privilege and Profound Gratitude:

Our Rabbis taught: “If one sees a crowd of Israelites, he says,
‘Blessed is He who discerns secrets, for the mind of each is different from that of the
other, just as the face of each is different from that of the other.’”

Ben Zoma once saw a crowd on one of the steps of the Temple Mount. He said,
“Blessed is He that discerns secrets; Blessed is He who has created all these to serve me.”

He used to say:

“What labors Adam had to carry out before he obtained bread to eat!

He ploughed, he sowed, he reaped, he bound [the sheaves],
he threshed and winnowed and selected the ears, he ground [them], and sifted [the flour],
he kneaded and baked, and then at last he ate;

whereas I get up, and find all these things done for me!

And how many labors Adam had to carry out before he obtained a garment to wear!

He had to shear, wash [the wool], comb it, spin it and weave it,
and then at last he obtained a garment to wear;

whereas I get up and find all these things done for me!

All kinds of craftsmen come early to the door of my house,
and I rise in the morning and find all these before me!”

Babylonian Talmud, B'rakhot 58a

X. Gratitude has a shape, it has limits – e.g., not to be at the expense of others:

As they went out before the vanguard, they said:

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‘Give thanks to Adonai, for His mercy endures forever!’” (*II Chronicles 20:21*)
R. Jonathan said: “Why are the words ‘for He is good’ omitted from this thanksgiving?
Because the Holy Blessed One does not rejoice at the downfall of the wicked.
Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 39b

XI. Ultimately, Gratitude goes to the Almighty...:

Though the wine belongs to the owner, the thanks are given to the butler
Proverb quoted by Rava in Babylonian Talmud, Bava Kamma 92b

XII. Mindfulness of Nature may lead to Gratitude (and don’t neglect the humor here!):

R. Simeon b. Halafta was a fat man.
One day, feeling hot, he climbed up, sat on a mountain boulder, and said to his daughter,
“Daughter, fan me with a fan, and I will give you bundles of spikenard.”
Just then, however, a breeze arose, whereupon he observed,
“How many bundles of spikenard [do I owe] to the Master of the [breeze]?”
Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 86a

XIII. Pre-verbal, pre-conscious Gratitude: a built-in, ‘swelling’ in the world’s course:

Our Rabbis taught: R. Jose the Galilean expounded:
“At the time the Israelites ascended from the Red Sea, they desired to utter a Song;
and how did they render the song?
The babe lay upon his mother's knees and the suckling sucked at his mother's breast;
when they saw the *Shekhinah*, the babe raised his neck, the suckling released the nipple,
and they exclaimed: ‘This is my God and I will praise Him!’ (*Exodus 16:3*)
as it is said:
‘Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings You have established strength.’” (*Psalms 8:3*)
R. Meir used to say: “Whence is it that even the embryos in their mothers’ womb sang?
As it is said,
‘Bless HaShem in the Congregations, HaShem, from the fountain of Israel!’” (*Ps. 68:27*)
But these could not behold [the *Shekhinah*]!? R. Tanhum said:
“The abdomen became for them a kind of transparent medium and they did behold it.”
Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 30b-31a

XIV. The Key is Awareness:

R. Joseph gave the following exposition: What is the purport of the Scriptural text,
“I will give thanks unto Thee, O Lord; for though You were angry with me,
Your anger is turned away, and You comfort me.” (*Isaiah 12:1*)
Of what does Scripture speak? It alludes to two men who set out on a trading expedition
when a thorn got into [the foot of] one of them who began to blaspheme and to revile.
After a time, however, when he heard that his friend's ship had sunk into the sea
he began to laud and praise.
Hence it is written, “Your anger is turned away, and You comfort me.”
This is in line with what R. Eleazar stated: What is implied by the Scriptural text,
“Who only does wondrous things; blessed be His glorious name for ever?” (*Psalms 72:18*)
Even the person for whom a miracle is performed is unaware of the miracle.
Babylonian Talmud, Niddah 31a

XV. A ‘Script’ of Gratitude and Ingratitude

He (Ben Zoma) used to say: “What does a good guest say?
‘How much trouble my host has taken for me! How much meat he has set before me!
How much wine he has set before me! How many cakes he has set before me!
And all the trouble he has taken was only for my sake!’
But what does a bad guest say?
‘How much after all has my host put himself out?
I’ve eaten one piece of bread, I’ve eaten one slice of meat, I’ve drunk one cup of wine!
All the trouble which my host has taken
was only for the sake of his wife and his children!’”
Babylonian Talmud, B’rakhot 58a

XVI. And a “Script’ for Gratitude to God:

What blessing do they say (for rain)?
R. Judah said:
“We give thanks to You for every drop which You have caused to fall for us.”
Babylonian Talmud, B’rakhot 59b

XVII. Expressing Gratitude to others is a good starting-place:

Ingratitude to man is ingratitude to God.
Shmuel HaNaggid, Ben Mishlei, 11th century, #8

XVIII. Gratitude in our times may be wanting but all the more pressing:

Mankind will not perish for want of information, but only for want of appreciation.
Abraham Joshua Heschel

Bonus voice of Jewish folk-wisdom:

Ven me zol Got danken far guts, volt nit zein kain tseit tsu baklogen zich oif shlechts.
If we thanked God for the good things, there wouldn’t be time to weep over the bad.
Yiddish Proverb

Highly recommended resource:

I Thank Therefore I Am: Gateways to Gratefulness

by Rabbi Henry Glazer (Xlibris Corporation, 2009)

To order: 1-888-795-4272; Orders@Xlibris.com

Preface: In our fragmented, heavily diagnosis-oriented systems, we often neglect to assess individuals' and families' innate or historical resources – and to help them name and access these as tools or supports in their healing. (Please note: It doesn't really matter *how* you classify these – what matters most is that we notice and identify them.) Someone may be very limited in one area and rich in another, and many people may never have considered/named their diverse resources, especially some more intangible ones. The questions noted below are simply suggestions – not a fixed formula!

Seven Dimensions of Resilience/Resources*

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1. Physical/Material:

What bodily diseases or difficulties have you met/overcome before, and how?

Where/how are you currently able, strong and/or whole? Physically open and growing?

In the past, what physical blessings have served you well?

Is there an object or place that helps you feel grounded, serene, joyous, and/or peaceful?

2. Emotional:

What are your emotional gifts – which emotions are you 'good at' or experienced with?

What emotional struggling have you done, with some success and growth?

To what positive emotions do you default (self-soothing, humor, self-assertion...)?

Right now, what emotional 'muscles' are highly developed, accessible, active – such as impatience, fear, relief, anger, curiosity, anxiety, gratitude, etc., etc.?

3. Cultural

What characteristics of your culture – from your community of origin and/or current identifications – could serve you now, or as you move ahead?

Whether you like these or not, how might they be part of your useful 'toolkit'?

4. Social/Familial

What relationships do you have in your life that can be nurturing/helpful, in any way?

In the past, which relationships (family, friends, work, etc.) truly supported you when you needed help/support? Which blessings did you inherit from your family or friendship circle?

Which relationships gave you lasting gifts – and what are these?

Which relationships could you nurture?

5. Cognitive

What cognitive strengths do you bring to problem-solving in relation to your health?

In what academic subjects did you, or would you like to, shine?

When did a 'different approach' to thinking/learning contribute to your progress?

Can you recall an experience of reframing or 're-thinking' that helped you?

6. Sensual

Which of your senses have been particularly available, strong, impactful?

Are you oriented more to: Sight? Smell? Sound? Movement? Touch? Taste?

What have been your most sustaining experiences in Nature?

7. Spiritual

How do you see yourself in this life, on this planet, in terms of purpose and identity?

Do you identify with certain spiritual images, stories, sayings, rituals?

How/Do you connect with a Higher Power, or The Big Picture, or Transcendence?

Have you dealt with something difficult and found meaning in it or through it?

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