

“Not by Bread Alone: An Attitude of Gratitude”

Shabbat Shalom!

Parashat Eikev is the source of the English saying “...man does not live on bread alone...” Today, we interpret this to mean there’s more to life than its physical or material aspect. Yet, the verse continues, “...but that man may live on anything the Lord decrees,” this refers to the manna G-d sent to sustain the Israelites in the desert. Here, it is Moses reminding the Israelites that it is G-d’s goodness and greatness that keeps them alive.

A few verses later, the Torah commands, “when you have eaten your fill, give thanks to the Lord your G-d for the good land which He has given you.” This verse is the basis for reciting the *birkat hamazon*, the blessing after meals. While the verse highlights G-d’s goodness, it also identifies a primary Jewish attitude toward life that is theologically unique on its own: gratitude.

The Jewish system of *brachot*, or blessings, are moments of reflection throughout the day to remind us we are lucky to have what we have...even if what we have may not live up to our ideal. Brachot also remind us there is more to life than having things. Reciting a *bracha* (whether or not they are words from your own heart, or the traditional rabbinic blessing) is humbling. It forces us to admit, when we ordinarily might be a bit self absorbed, that we are indebted to something else for help along our way. The Jewish system of brachot teaches us never to take anything for granted. For myself, that is a caring family, dedicated friends, good health and delightful food. Gratitude is fundamental to Jewish life. Simply said, it is how individuals recognize the good in their lives. I find this very spiritual. As one of my favorite theologians, Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, writes, “Blessings express a singular kind of spirituality”. If blessings are how we convey our gratitude to G-d, then, I think Rabbi Hoffman is saying spirituality begins with gratitude.

Many scholars have stood strong by the core belief that gratitude is central to Jewish life, truly, to every human life. Rabbi Abraham

Joshua Heschel wrote, ‘Humankind will not die out for lack of information, but for we may perish for want of appreciation.’”

I have discovered this core spiritual ideal personally, most recently, as it came alive for me during this past year. The last couple of years I have been training in Clinical Pastoral Education, or CPE. This is the study and practice of chaplaincy work, and in my case, health care chaplaincy. I had the incredible opportunity this year to be enrolled in Hebrew Senior Life’s Jewish Geriatric Chaplaincy training program. When I wasn’t in my CPE classes, the didactic and text study part of the program, I was a Chaplain intern on the Memory Support, or Alzheimer’s unit, of one of Hebrew Senior Life’s long-term care facilities. On the unit, I helped lead Shabbat and holiday services and spirituality-based programs, assist at memorial services, but primarily, I would make pastoral visits each week during the yearlong internship. These visits allowed me the opportunity to meet one on one with the residents; sometimes the visit would extend to family members. A pastoral visit to a patient living with dementia or Alzheimer’s disease can look very different from one with a patient with normal brain functioning. Often times my pastoral visits to these patients involved providing comfort when there was confusion, offering a familiar prayer and most importantly, sharing music. I quickly came to learn, the power of song cannot be underestimated, when working with individuals with dementia.

Early on in my studies I learned another important principle of chaplaincy. Actually, one of the profession’s cornerstones: the Spiritual Assessment Tool. This is a list of basic Spiritual/Religious issues and the corresponding pastoral care focus that a chaplain may give the patient, in response, during a visit. As a chaplain, whether it is the first visit or the 20th to a regular patient, I always do a Spiritual Assessment. Another way to approach it is, taking the patient’s spiritual temperature. While there are several different assessments, each connected to various religions and denominations, Catholic and Protestant, I’m most familiar with the Jewish assessment. You will not be surprised to discover that there are seven spiritual issues. I will share these with you; Love and Belonging, Forgiveness and Reconciliation, Trust, Hope, Meaning, Identity, and that unique theological attitude: Gratitude! Gratitude, or in Hebrew, *hodayah*, recognizing the good. During a pastoral visit, if I assessed that

gratitude was the most vital spiritual issue for the patient, it would be because, that patient had a desire to express thankfulness. The patient would be thankful for life's blessings. The pastoral care focus, or my response as a chaplain may be; being fully present for the individual as they verbalize, sing, pray, or whatever way, they express their gratitude. I also could help the individual to become more fully aware of the joy they feel, through being present as they offer their thanks to G-d. This is just what occurred at Pesach time during one of my regular visits with an unforgettable resident, whom I will call Addy.

Addy arrived on the Memory Support unit in January, from Assisted Living. While her dementia had increased somewhat, prompting the move, she remained one of the highest cognitively functioning residents on the floor. As I learned through my chaplaincy visits with Addy, family members, her chart and from staff, she was an 88 year old widow, with a strong Jewish identity. Her accent was Polish, as she came from a town called Tarnov, outside Krakow, until she was forced to leave during the War. Addy would often share her narrative with me, always the same, that she was a 13 year old girl, who was captured by the Germans, and who also knew to escape from them. She ran away from the Germans in the camp. Her story would also always involve telling me, as she pointed to blue tattooed numbers on her left forearm, "They did this to me". Addy and I would often talk about how this symbol of her survival, is needed to tell the world that what happened to her, so this should never happen again. We also talked about her deep faith, which never seemed to waiver, and which she attributed to her father, a scholarly man.

During one of our visits one afternoon, close to Pesach time, Addy asked me if there would be a seder on the floor. I gave her the details of how the holiday would be celebrated. I had the Haggadah that was to be used with me, and we looked at some of the passages in it together. We came upon the response to the Four Questions, I read, " We were once the slaves of Pharoah in Egypt, the Lord brought us fourth from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm". Then something remarkable happened, as Addy interjected, " G-d also took me out of that place, away from the Germans with his arm". (as she lifts her tattooed arm up). I was overwhelmed by what she relayed to me, my eyes filled with tears, as I embraced Addy. I repeated what

she said, “Yes, G-d took you out of Germany, out of your own slavery with his arm”. Then I added, does your arm remind you of G-d’s help?” Addy said, it did, and she expressed her thankfulness to G-d, and how she still believes in G-d, because G-d helped her “run away” from the Germans. The intensity of this visit was high for me. I sensed Addy was getting tired as well, so we shifted to some other concerns she was having. I encouraged her to participate in the seder, and the visit came to a close that day.

As I left Addy that afternoon, I thought about how grateful I was to have met this courageous survivor, and how she shared her story of faith with me. I went to a quiet space, the chapel, and said my own bracha. Then, at that moment, another thought came to me. I have a young teenage son. Addy was Jonah’s age when she faced the unthinkable, when her life changed forever. He lives in a different era, an era where he can live a Jewish life, where he never has to look around him, wondering if it is free and safe to be himself. Jonah does not have to worry about persecution or if he can express his Judaism openly. For this, I carry a tremendous amount of gratitude. Addy’s story is now a part of my stories. She went from a very dark place, into the light, and does not take anything for granted. Eli Weisel, who also was in the camps during the Shoah as a teenager, once said the following about this subject, “ No one is capable of gratitude, as one who has emerged from the kingdom of the night”.

I want to conclude this morning with one of my favorite Israeli songs, ***Al Kol Eileh, or For All These Things***. It was written as an anthem for the Yom Kippur War, but for me, it is an anthem of gratitude. Please join me in singing a Hebrew and English version of Naomi Shemer’s song.