

Gratitude – A Walk Down Memory Lane

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During the summer, as news broke out that Kevin Durant, one of the greatest basketball players in the NBA was going to join the Golden State Warriors, Frayda and I, together with our boys, watched a very moving video, taped two years ago, of Kevin Durant receiving the NBA's MVP or most valuable player award (I know...it's an academic shul, I get it...). It is a video that Frayda and I refer to from time to time in our conversations with our children as it demonstrates to us, in ways that are relatable to our boys, important and essential values.

Some of you may recall that during the Gala celebration, we spoke of this video while we addressed our children, explaining to them that this shul is our team, and that ultimately they, our own children, always remain our most valuable players.

In the opening of his remarks, Durant explains, "I had so much help. So many people believed in me when I didn't believe in myself. So many people [...] motivated me every single day to be who I am. I fell so many times and got back up. I've been through the toughest times with my family, but I'm still standing."

Durant then proceeds to call out each one of his teammates by name, expressing his gratitude to each one of them individually.

At the very end of the speech, Durant addresses his own mother, and here he makes a critical point, "When something good happens to you, I don't know about you guys, but I tend to look back to what brought me here."

Turning to his mom, he says, "You wake me up in the middle of the night in the summer times, making me run up a hill, making me do pushups, screaming at me from the sidelines of my games at 8 or 9 years old. We weren't supposed to be here. You made us believe. You kept us off the street. You put clothes on our backs, food on the table. When you didn't eat, you made sure we ate. You went to sleep hungry. You sacrificed for us. You're the real MVP."

"When something good happens to you, I don't know about you guys, but I tend to look back to what brought me here." (Kevin Durant's MVP speech can be viewed here -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z-0VH-0D6NY>)

A story I once shared with some of you:

Rav Yisrael Zev Gustman, my own rebbi's rabbi, lived in Vilna before the war. "When the Nazis came he escaped to the woods and joined up with a group of partisans. The Nazis would frequently dispatch troops into the thick Lithuanian woods to route out the rebels and Jews. Rav Gustman succeeded repeatedly in escaping detection by living among the thick undergrowth." (As told by Rabbi Lipman Podolsky, see <http://briskyeshiva.blogspot.com/2009/05/this-is-one-of-great-mizrachi-rabonin.html>). In this way, his life was saved.

Upon making Aliyah, Rav Gustman, despite his stature, and in later years, despite his old age, made it his habit to water the yeshiva's plants. On occasion, Rav Gustman would explain that he felt forever indebted to the plants.

"When something good happens to you, I don't know about you guys, but I tend to look back to what brought me here."

This summer, as Frayda and I envisioned parts of our shul's celebration marking our ten years at CBI, we discussed and remembered several individuals who made a lasting impression on our life. We feel so blessed that we got to share some of our teachers, rabbis, and mentors with you during that weekend celebration. More importantly, we feel blessed to have had the opportunity to express our gratitude to them so publicly and also so personally.

In fact, at the end of the night, at the end of that incredible weekend, I approached our founding Rabbi Saul Berman and Rabbanit Shellee Berman, and shared these very words with them, "This is your shul. I hope that this weekend conveyed to you the gratitude that this entire community, past, present, and future feel towards you."

Now there is one more person that I thanked in the weeks leading up to the gala.

In late August I sent a Facebook message to one person and it read as follows, "Dear Mrs. Rosenthal (fictive name), My name is Yonatan Cohen (though you might remember me as Yoni) and I believe you served as my English teacher at Talmud Torah and Herzliah High School over 25 years ago. Please let me know if there is a way to best reach you by email (I'm including Mr. Rosenthal as it appears that he is slightly more active on FB) as I would like to share words of appreciation with you. Warmly, Yonatan"

A few days past, and then I received this message, "I am thrilled to receive your contact. I remember you perfectly. Congratulations on your success. And that you married Frayda is beyond exciting. What a beautiful match. Her dad works in my residential apartment building and, whenever I ask about Frayda, he always speaks glowingly of her accomplishments and husband. Who knew it was you? I was the lucky teacher to have you both in my classes."

And here was my response:

"Dear Mrs. Rosenthal,

In my work as a rabbi over the past ten years, I have thought of you on several occasions and at each of those times I felt a deep urge to contact you and express my appreciation. As you might recall, my family moved to Montreal when I was ten years old. I believe you were my English teacher during that first year (5th grade at Talmud Torah). A number of years later, you were once again my English teacher at HHS. There are two aspects that most stand out in my memory of you. First, the content and reading assignments were always rich and meaningful. Second, the assignments themselves were challenging and demanding. In many ways, I often felt like you treated us like mature adults (and we were quite a wild bunch), with respect, with genuine interest, and somewhat with an eye towards the people we would one day become. This brings me to the debt of gratitude that I feel I owe to you. When I arrived in Canada, I hardly spoke a word of English and in many ways your classes inspired me to learn the language and master it myself. Nowadays, as a rabbi I speak and teach (in English) publicly almost on a daily basis. I deliver sermons every shabbat and publish regular columns in our local Jewish press. Sometimes after delivering a moving or complex lecture, I take a moment to pause and appreciate individuals and moments in my life. At those times, I don't only return to my parents' home (to whom I owe so much!) or the world of my yeshiva (I attended an incredible rabbinical school) but I also return to your class. At those very moments, I feel compelled to express an additional word of gratitude alongside each of my spoken words ("Thank you Mrs. Rosenthal for making this word possible...and this one...and this one too!). You have made a deep impact on my life. Thank you for being my teacher and believing in my ability to learn and grow. Yours sincerely, Yonatan"

"When something good happens to you, I don't know about you guys, but I tend to look back to what brought me here."

I have taught this insight countless times before, but permit me to teach it again, because it is so fundamental in my eyes. The great rabbinic luminary, Rav Soloveitchik zt"l pointed out our tradition's

unique understanding of gratitude as it is expressed in our blessings and prayers (see Rav Soloveitchik, "Harerei Kedem," Vol. 2, 179d).

Each and every time we give thanks to God we begin by focusing on a particular thing or event, but sure enough, our attention shifts and moves towards a greater, profounder, acknowledgment of the multitude of things for which our gratitude is owed.

Three examples:

In our central prayer, the *Amidah*, we say three times each day: "*Modim anchanu Lach*" – we give thanks to God for very specific deeds, that He shields and protects us and that He shows kindness and goodness to us, daily. The blessing however widens its scope midway and includes all things: "*Ve'al Kulam.*" We conclude by giving thanks to God for everything.

Similarly, in "*Birkat HaMazon*," the Grace after the Meal, we begin by noting our specific thanks and gratitude. "*Nodeh lecha*" thank you God for the good land that gifts us this nourishment. But here too we quickly widen the scope and shift towards the general. We conclude the blessing by saying "*Ve'al ha'kol*" for everything God, we owe You gratitude.

Finally, when we are spared from life-threatening situations, we recite the blessing "*HaGomel*" to express our gratitude for God's grace and goodness. Yet here too, our tradition guides us to recognize goodness beyond this particular occasion. Here too we say, "*sh'gmalani kol tuv*," that God had rewarded us with all goodness, and not just on this particular occasion.

Gratitude begins in the present tense. But if it remains in the present tense then it will also always remain incomplete. True religious gratitude transcends time; it challenges us to take note of all that is good in our lives today, and to recognize that the good of today is forever indebted to the good of the past. (This section was presented as one of Judaism's fundamental messages in my "Letter to Isaac" here - <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/a-letter-to-isaac/>)

R. Abraham Joshua Heschel put it this way, "there is a built-in sense of indebtedness in the consciousness of man, an awareness of owing gratitude, of being called upon at certain moments to reciprocate, to answer, to live in a way which is compatible with the grandeur and mystery of living."

Today's Mussaf service contains the critical liturgical section of *Zichronot* (of remembrances). Listen carefully to these words:

"You remember the making of the world;
Under Your gaze, all hidden things come to light...
For nothing is forgotten before the throne of Your glory,
and nothing is hidden from Your eyes.

[...]

For You bring a day decreed for remembrance
to come to each spirit and soul;
that Your many works shall be remembered.

Happy is the one who does not forget..."

Indeed, happy are those who remembers...

To loosely paraphrase the Machzor section of remembrances, on this day, remember with gratitude that each of us, in some way or another, survived great floods.

As it is written in the Torah:

"God remembered Noah and all the animals
and all the cattle that were with him in the ark,
and God made a wind blow across the earth, and the waters grew calm."

Remember with gratitude that each of us, in some way or another, already came out of Egypt and other narrow places in our own lives.

As it says in the Torah:

"God heard their groaning,
and God remembered his Covenant
with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob."

Remember with gratitude your youth and growing pains. Remember the challenges you overcame and the lovingkindness that was extended to you so freely.

As it says in the Torah:

“Is Ephraim not a treasured son to Me, My child of delights?

As I speak of him, always, I remember him again.

And so...I will tender to him with compassion,’ says the LORD.”

Happy is the one who remembers with gratitude...

Friends, we don't know what the world has in store for us this year. But if we remember with gratitude what has transpired in the past...If we remember the floods, and the exodus, and the growing pains...If we remember with gratitude the covenant that held us through those moments, then surely we will find a path to once again reclaim meaning and purpose in our life.

May the One who remembers the covenant, remember each of us this day and grant each of us, the House of Israel, and the entire world, a good year, a year of blessing, of peace, of prosperity...and, of gratitude. May God grant us a year of gratitude.