



Thanksgiving: Praise and Pain • Parshat Vayeitzei

The names that Leah provides her children in *Parshat Vayeitzei* give us a glimpse into her inner life and deepest desires.

Leah, the “hated” wife, bore children, precisely, the verse indicates, because she was hated (Gen. 29:31). The names of her first three children reflect this inner struggle, and her hope that through her children, she could finally attain her husband’s love. Reuben (literally, “see a son”) was so named because “Surely God has looked (*ra’ah*) upon my affliction; now therefore my husband will love me” (Gen. 29:32). Yet, her wish was not granted, so she named her second son Shimon (from the root, “to hear”), “Because God has heard (*shama*) that I was hated, He has therefore given me this son also” (Gen. 29:33). She did not give up faith in this love, and names her third son, Levi (meaning, to join), hoping that “Now this time will my husband be joined (*yilaveh*) to me, because I have born him three sons” (Gen. 29:34). The chapter ends with the birth of her fourth child, who she named Judah, declaring that “this time I will thank (*odeh*) God” (Gen. 29:35).

Ultimately, the text remains cryptic. We get a glimpse into her heart, but not the full depths of her experience. Why does she only thank God after her fourth son is born? Were her hopes realized? Did Jacob love her after she bore him these children?

Rabbi David Tzvi Hoffman writes that she thanked God after Judah was born because her desires were finally fulfilled. She not only was blessed

with children, but also, she finally received her husband’s love. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, in contrast, contends that she ultimately did not receive Jacob’s affection. At no point in the text does it indicate that she no longer perceived the enmity. Her gratitude, instead, is a product of her acceptance of this sad reality. Leah finally realized that she could not earn her husband’s approval by having children. After relinquishing this ambition, she was able to express her gratitude to God for the children with whom she was blessed.

Leah was able to be grateful amidst pain. This, Rabbi Soloveitchik suggests, is the legacy she left for her children and her descendants, that “despite the suffering and persecution we have been subjected to, we remain thankful to God for the privilege of having been selected as His people (*Chumash Mesoras HaRav*, p. 223).”

Feeling and expressing gratitude amidst suffering has resonances in the history of the American Thanksgiving holiday as well. Thanksgiving was designated a national holiday by Abraham Lincoln in 1863 amidst the Civil War. In addition to thanking God, Lincoln acknowledged the war’s devastation, praying to “commend to His tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife.” He also prays for “the interposition of the Almighty Hand to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it as soon as may be consistent with Divine purposes to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquility and Union” (Presidential Proclamation 106). Cultivating the national

character of gratitude was particularly important because the nation was still in the throes of conflict and anguish.

Social psychologist and gratitude expert, Robert Emmons recommends cultivating gratitude both when times are good, and perhaps even more importantly, when times are challenging. Grateful people, research indicates, are more resilient to both minor stressors and more major upheavals. “In the face of demoralization, gratitude,” he writes, “has the power to energize. In the face of brokenness, gratitude has the power to heal. In the face of despair, gratitude has the power to

bring hope (“Gratitude as the Foundation for Joy,” *Journal of Youth and Theology*, 20(1), 2021, p. 19).

As Israel continues its war against Hamas, and as we eagerly await the safe return of the hostages, celebrating Thanksgiving or expressing gratitude generally, seems like an impossible, almost inappropriate ambition. Yet, following in Leah’s lead, we try to balance our gratefulness to God and our emotional pain. Despite the inner and outer turmoil, we can still open our eyes to the precious blessings in our lives and declare “this time I will thank God.”

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Character Challenge: Think of a past or an ongoing personal struggle. Try to identify at least one aspect of the experience for which you can feel grateful and express that gratitude to God.

Quote from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt”l: “It takes focused attention to become aware of how much we have to be grateful for. That, in different ways, is the logic of prayer, of making blessings, of Shabbat, and many other elements of Jewish life. It is also embedded in our collective name. The word *Modeh*, “I give thanks,” comes from the same root as *Yehudi*, meaning “Jew.” We acquired this name from Jacob’s fourth son, named by his mother Leah who, at his birth said, “This time I will thank God” (Gen. 29:35). *Jewishness is thankfulness:* not the most obvious definition of Jewish identity, but by far the most life-enhancing.” (“Giving Thanks,” *Covenant & Conversation*)