

I've been thinking about the confluence of Parashat Vayetse and Thanksgiving this year, partially in light of what I noticed and spoke about in my video earlier this week – the birth of Yehuda, the fourth son of Leah. As Genesis Chapter 29, verse 35 teaches, “[Leah] conceived again and bore a son, and declared, “Ha’pa’am odeh et Hashem.” “This time I will thank Hashem.” Therefore she named him Yehuda/Judah. Then she stopped bearing. The name Yehuda, as I mentioned earlier this week, is explicitly connected to the verb l’hodot – to give thanks.

I think it's deeply instructive to notice what is being thanked for in this Torah portion. Leah is less-loved wife of Ya'akov. That too is explicit. Four verses earlier, Torah teaches, “Seeing that Leah was unloved, Hashem opened her womb.” Verses 32-34 each tersely describe the birth of Leah's first three sons, all of whom she names with names relating to her hope that her husband will finally love her. Then comes Yehuda. With Yehudah, something shifts. “This time I will thank. . .”

Rabbi Shai Held writes, “Leah has somehow found the courage to accept that her life is not going to turn out as she had hoped. She has spent years aching for the love of her husband, repeatedly convincing herself that perhaps it is just around the corner. But now, suddenly, she sees that this constant yearning will only generate more fantasy and illusion, and the steadily mounting pain of a dream dashed time and time again. Something inside of her shifts, and rather than sinking in the sorrow of what she does not have, she is able to embrace the beauty and fullness of what she does.”¹

Let's also take a moment to notice Yehudah's father, Jacob. He is the second son, less preferred by his father, who bargains his way into the birthright and tricks his way into a blessing. Yehuda himself is an ambivalent character – fourth born of the less-preferred mother, he becomes in many ways the leader of the family through the events that will unfold throughout the rest of Genesis.

¹ <https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/can-we-be-grateful-and-disappointed-same-time>

Yehudah shows moral development, from being the brother who will willingly sell another brother into slavery in Genesis 37, to being the brother who will step forward and offer his own life to prevent another brother from being sold into slavery in Genesis 44. All Jews today, all *Yehudim* – with the exception of Levites and Cohanim – are considered mythically descended from Yehudah.

There is an understandable tendency among many Jews to cast ourselves as superior to the rest of humanity. I don't mean just the official notion of Jews as the chosen people, which Reconstructing Judaism officially rejects. I mean the subtle ways that even those of us who don't believe in "chosenness" still hold onto narratives of Jewish moral or intellectual strength, as if it is somehow inherent. For example, consider those internet memes about how Jews have won more Nobel prizes than any other ethnic group.

If anything, Torah seems to be pushing us in the opposite direction, reminding us as readers: Yes – you are descended from Avraham. But you're also descended from second children and unloved wives, people who have cheated and strived, who have made do with unfulfilled yearnings. You are not inherently better than any other nation.

If we do manage to achieve some sort of moral ascension, I'd suggest that it is through this very mindfulness, the mindfulness of Yehuda. We are given this tool of gratitude. Of saying "I will give thanks," even in sorry, incomplete, situations.

Rabbi Avi Straudsberg published a beautiful meditation on Thanksgiving yesterday, and she wrote Rabbi Avi Straudsberg writes, "Developing a practice of gratitude is not only about responding to individual moments of blessing throughout our day, but rather is fundamentally about our orientation to the world. We must, in our core, be deeply grateful for any and all blessings we receive, whether they come to us through people or animals or plants."

How appropriate to consider the birth of Yehuda on Thanksgiving week. Gratitude as practice, instead of as a response to special occasions is what our tradition is all about. It's why Jews for millennia celebrated the redemption from slavery in Egypt on Pesach – *even when they were living in times of persecution*. It's why we open each day with *modeh ani* – I am grateful to be alive before you/ we take nothing for granted.

In theory, it's lovely. Day to day, it's harder to remember to be grateful not only for the little blessings, but for the incomplete blessings. That seems to me particularly poignant this Shabbat, of all Shabbatot, when some of the captives of Israel are finally returning home.

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Not enough of them. The grief and rage are still huge, and so many questions are still unanswered and so many necessary demands are still unmet.

And yet, As Rabbi Jay Michaelson wrote in *The Forward* earlier this week, “. . . even though most Israelis don’t celebrate Thanksgiving, there is finally some cause for giving thanks. The price was dear, and impossible to balance on some moral or strategic ledger. But that is not how the most difficult moral choices actually play out in our political or private lives. We face the circumstances before us, and make the best choice of the options available.”²

It seems a simple enough thing to preach gratitude the day after Thanksgiving. It feels almost ridiculous. But it also feels important to me to say: we’re not inherently better than everyone else. We’re the descendants of over-looked children, of unloved wives. To some extent, that loneliness may be inherited in alarming ways. But we also have this possibility of gratitude in our inheritance, literally encoded inside the word *Yehudim* – Jews. May we remember to accept each gift, each blessing, no matter how incomplete, with gratitude for what is, even as we also hold vision for what may yet be. And may that be a moral guide for becoming the moral people we wish to be.

² <https://forward.com/opinion/570688/israels-hostage-deal-makes-the-best-of-an-impossible-situation-with-amas/>