WEEKLY DVAR TORAH • VAYEITZEI

Holding Space for *Gratitude*



4G SENIOR MECHANECH

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הַפַּעַם אוֹדֶה אֶת־ה׳

"This time I will thank Hashem."

BEREISHIS 29:35

When Leah Imeinu gives birth to her fourth son, Yehudah, the Torah tells us:

וַתַּהַר עוֹד וַתֵּלֶד בֵּן וַתֹּאמֶר הַפַּעַם אוֹדֶה אֶת־ה׳ עַל־כֵּן קָרְאָה שְׁמוֹ יְהוּדָה

"And she conceived again and bore a son, and she said, 'This time I will thank Hashem.' Therefore she called his name Yehudah."

BEREISHIS 29:35

Chazal (Berachos 7b) make an astonishing statement about Leah's gratitude:

מִיּוֹם שֶׁבָּרָא הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא אֶת עוֹלָמוֹ לֹא הָיָה אָדָם שֶׁהוֹדָה לְהַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא עַד שֶׁבָּאתָה לֵאָה וְהוֹדַתּוּ

"From the day Hashem created His world, no one had thanked Him until Leah came and thanked Him."

BERACHOS 7B

The classic question that has been asked since the time this statement was made is, how can this possibly be? Avraham Avinu never thanked Hashem? Yitzchak and Yaakov never expressed gratitude for the brachos in their lives? What was so extraordinary about Leah's declaration of *hapa'am odeh es Hashem*?

And perhaps more importantly, what are Chazal teaching us about the way we experience the brachos in our own lives?

To appreciate what happened when Yehudah was born, we need to look at the names Leah gave her first three children.

When Reuven was born, Leah said, כִּי עַתָּה יֶאֱהָבַנִי אִישִׁי, now my husband will love me. When Shimon was born, she said, כִּי־שָׁמַע ה׳ כִּי־שְׂנוּאָה אָנֹכִי, Hashem heard that I am unloved. And when Levi was born, she hoped, הַפַּעַם יִלָּוֶה אִישִׁי אֵלָי, this time my husband will become attached to me.

Leah was clearly grateful to Hashem. She recognized that He had seen her suffering and heard her tefillos. But notice how the birth of each child was connected to her longing for Yaakov's love. She hoped that perhaps this child would finally bring her the closeness she so desperately wanted.

And then Yehudah was born.

הַפַּעַם אוֹדֶה אֶת־ה׳

This time she simply thanked Hashem. What changed?

Chazal (Bereishis Rabbah 71:4) offer a fascinating mashal. A Kohen went down to a threshing floor, where one person gave him an entire kor of maaser. The Kohen didn't thank him. Another person gave him a small handful of ordinary grain, and the Kohen expressed his gratitude.

The first person was understandably upset. He had given the Kohen so much more! Why hadn't he received any thanks?

The Kohen explained that the maaser was something he was already entitled to receive. The second person, however, had given him something beyond what he was owed.

The Medrash explains that the Imahos knew Yaakov would have twelve sons among four wives. Each anticipated having three children. When Leah gave birth to her fourth son, she realized that she had received more than her expected portion, and she thanked Hashem.

The Medrash is somewhat troublesome. Why should our gratitude depend upon receiving more than we expected? Leah had already been blessed with three children! Wasn't that enough reason to thank Hashem? Surely Chazal aren't suggesting that we should only thank Hashem when He gives us more than we thought we deserved.

Perhaps Chazal are drawing our attention to something that happens to all of us. We receive the most extraordinary brachos from Hashem, but once we begin expecting them, we slowly lose our ability to appreciate them.

Think about a young couple desperately davening to have children. Every month brings another disappointment. They would give anything to hear a baby crying in their home. And then, with Hashem's help, they have children. Years pass. Their home is filled with noise, fighting, homework, bedtime struggles, and all the exhaustion that comes with raising a family.

Of course they love their children. But how often do they remember that the very things exhausting them today were once the things they begged Hashem to give them?

Or consider someone who spent years hoping to find a job. When he finally received an offer, he couldn't stop thanking Hashem. A few years later, he's frustrated with his salary, annoyed with his boss, and upset that he hasn't received a promotion. Nothing necessarily went wrong, he simply became accustomed to what he had.

Psychologically, we have an extraordinary ability to adapt to our circumstances. Something that once brought us tremendous joy gradually becomes part of our ordinary experience, and once it becomes ordinary, we begin looking for the next thing that will make us happy.

Eventually, we don't merely become accustomed to the good things in our lives, we begin to feel entitled to them. Somewhere along the way, the bracha becomes an expectation, and we stop experiencing it as a gift.

Leah was a woman who knew tremendous pain. Chazal (Bava Basra 123a) tell us that when she heard she was destined to marry Eisav, she cried and davened until her eyelashes fell out. She wanted a different future, and she begged Hashem for it.

Even after marrying Yaakov, her longing to be loved did not disappear. In fact, years after Yehudah was born, when Leah gave birth to Zevulun, she once again expressed the hope that Yaakov would become more attached to her.

הַפַּעַם יִזְבְּלֵנִי אִישִׁי

"This time my husband will dwell with me."
BEREISHIS 30:20

This is important. Leah's gratitude when Yehudah was born did not mean that everything in her life was suddenly wonderful. She was still carrying a very real pain, and this makes her gratitude all the more remarkable.

Sometimes we imagine that being grateful means being completely satisfied with our lives. If we're still struggling, if there are things we desperately want that we haven't received, we wonder whether we are somehow failing in our hakaras hatov. But why should that be true?

The parents who went childless for years have the right to be exhausted or frustrated or upset when their children are driving them crazy. The question is, can they hold space for all of the very real emotions they are feeling and be grateful at the same time for the children that are making them nuts.

> *We don't have to pretend that everything is wonderful in order to thank Hashem.*

Perhaps we can now understand what was so extraordinary about Leah's declaration of gratitude. Of course the Avos thanked Hashem, but Leah's *hodaah* teaches us something about the way we receive the goodness in our lives.

The Medrash explains that when Leah gave birth to her fourth child, she realized that she had received more than she expected. But I wonder if the fourth child also allowed her to look back at the first three children differently. Until now, each child had represented the possibility that Yaakov might finally love her. With Yehudah, she could appreciate the gift itself without needing it to accomplish something else for her.

And perhaps this is why Chazal attach such significance to Leah's gratitude. The birth of Yehudah reminded her that what she had come to expect was also a gift. Her fourth child was not the only reason to thank Hashem. He helped her recognize how much she had already been given.

I think about how many things in our lives today were once the subject of our most heartfelt tefillos. We begged Hashem for them. We promised ourselves that if we were only given this one thing, we would never take it for granted. And then Hashem gave it to us. Somewhere along the way, we got used to having it.

TAKE IT WITH YOU

Maybe we need to spend a little more time remembering what it felt like before we received the things we now take for granted.

This is part of our avodas Hashem. We can continue to daven for what is missing in our lives, just as Leah continued to long for Yaakov's love. But we have to learn to recognize the brachos that are already present, even when life is difficult.

After all, the fact that we've become accustomed to a bracha doesn't make it any less of a bracha.

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SOURCES

Bereishis 29:35 (sefaria.org/Genesis.29.35) · Berachos 7b (sefaria.org/Berakhot.7b) · Bereishis Rabbah 71:4 (sefaria.org/Bereshit_Rabbah.71.4) · Bava Basra 123a (sefaria.org/Bava_Batra.123a) · Bereishis 30:20 (sefaria.org/Genesis.30.20)