

**He Had a Hat**  
Yom Kippur 5768 (2007)  
Rabbi Perry Netter

Don't stop me if you've heard this one.

A Jewish grandmother is watching her grandchild playing on the beach when a huge wave comes and washes him out to sea. She pleads, "Please God, save my only grandson. I beg of you, bring him back." And a big wave comes and washes the boy back onto the beach, good as new. She looks up to heaven and says: "He had a hat!"

This is one of my favorite Myron Cohen jokes. Myron Cohen was the funniest Jewish comic ever. Just looking at him made me laugh; and as soon as he spoke, with his heavy Yiddish accent, I was giggling. And he had a way of telling jokes that was unparalleled.

But even without Myron Cohen and his perfect delivery, we still laugh at this joke.

I'm not sure why you laugh, but I know why I do. I laugh because this joke feels so familiar. And I laugh because it hurts so much I don't know what else to do. How many of us know this grandmother? How many of us grew up with this grandmother? And how many of us are this grandmother? I laugh out of recognition, that so many people I know, including me, are infected with this disease of the soul. This disease is called "ingratitude." After God saved her grandson, all she could say was *he had a hat*.

Ingratitude is a soul-sickness that infects many of us. It is a disease that attacks the eyes, making us see only what is missing in our lives and making us blind to what we have. It is a disease that attacks the heart, hardening our arteries with jealousy. It is a disease that attacks the soul, filling it with bitterness and resentment and envy.

And it is a disease that is transmitted from generation to generation. Sometimes it seems like ingratitude is a basic element of Jewish character. We can be such a difficult people at times. From the very beginnings of our peoplehood we have shown ingratitude. Isn't that the story of our stiff-necked people in the Torah?

It was a well-known secret at JTS that when Abraham Joshua Heschel was in the midst of writing a book, the last thing he wanted to do was to teach rabbinical students. All he wanted to do was to write. But one of Heschel's most enduring classroom lessons took place the week of Parshat Shelakh Lekha, the parsha that tells the story of the spies who scouted out the land of Israel before B'nai Yisrael were to enter it. You know the story: 12 scouts went into the land; 10 came back and said that we shouldn't go in because the indigenous population is too strong and too fortified and too powerful. On that particular week of Shelakh Lekha, while Heschel was writing one of his books, he walked into the classroom and said, "This week we read about the spies. Can you imagine? After God brought the plagues and split the sea and defeated Pharaoh, after God brought them out of Egypt and gave them food and water and shelter in the midbar for 40 years, after all that,"

Heschel said, “just as God tells them, ‘Go enter the land and inherit it,’ they say NO. Can you imagine? Have you ever heard of such a thing? Have you ever heard of such ingratitude?” And then Heschel turned and walked out of the room, and went back to his office, back to his typewriter. The entire class lasted 30 seconds, but the lesson lasted beyond his lifetime.

Because the answer is, yes. We have heard of such ingratitude. We hear about it every step of the way through the wilderness. No sooner had the waters of the Red Sea become quiet again; there was no water to drink. So B’nai Yisrael complained to Moshe, and with delicious sarcasm, they said, “What, there weren’t enough graves in Egypt, you had to bring us out here to die?” How quickly they had forgotten about the bitterness of slavery; how soon they forgot about the miracles, the signs and wonders God brought in Egypt, and how they had been redeemed. Now, in that moment, there was no water, and what had God done for them lately?

Miracles mean precious little when you don’t get everything you want. *He had a hat.*

Every day in the wilderness B’nai Yisrael were fed by the miracle of the manna. But after years of eating manna, they complained: “Is this all there is? Manna again? Every day the same thing. Enough with the manna. We want meat.” And then they demonstrated the most startling example of selective memory in history: “We remember the fish that we used to eat for free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions and the garlic... all we see is this manna.” (Bamidbar 11:5)

Yes, Professor Heschel, we have heard of such ingratitude.

And then later there was the rebellion in the wilderness against the authority of Moshe and Aharon led by their cousin, Korah, and his minions. What was it that drove Korah to rebel? It was envy, it was jealousy, it was greed.

How does this happen? And how did this happen to us? This isn’t the way we started, back when we were just a family. Do you know why we are called Jews? It is after Judah, Leah’s fourth son, whose name was chosen by Leah from the verb “l’hodot,” to give thanks. Why did she name him Judah? Because he was her fourth son, and Rashi tells us that Jacob’s four wives knew they were to be the mothers of the twelve tribes. So each woman could expect to be the mother of three. So Leah named her fourth son Judah because of her gratitude that God had given her more than her share of sons. That is why we are Jews, and not Israelites, or Hebrews, because we are a people that gives thanks. And that is why it was in the territory of Judah that the Temple was built, which housed the altar on which the Todah, the Thanksgiving sacrifice, was offered. Gratitude is supposed to be the foundation of the Jewish attitude to life. Gratitude is the key to happiness, and the key to mental health.

Melanie Klein was one of Freud’s most devoted followers. Her piece on Envy and Gratitude remains one of the most important statements in the field. Klein writes that if we don’t cultivate gratitude, we will be consumed with envy and jealousy. We will be

filled with anger and rage, wanting what other people have, feeling victimized that we don't have enough, feeling deprived of something to which we feel entitled.

And that is the key word, isn't it? Entitled.

A recent New Yorker cartoon depicts a homeless man running after a Wall Street executive carrying a briefcase. With his hand extended, the homeless man says, "*I feel like I should be compensated for the weeks that you were on vacation.*"

When we feel a sense of entitlement, the faculty for appreciation for what we have is crippled. It is very difficult to feel any sense of gratitude. An advertisement recently asked me "Don't you deserve a new Lexus?" Well, no, in fact, I don't. The reality is I don't even deserve a car. I am not entitled to it. But I am grateful that I have one.

The Jewish attitude is the exact opposite of entitlement, which is that I am undeserving of anything I get. There is a berakha that is said at the Torah service by someone who has survived a potentially life-threatening experience, like flying over the ocean, or recovering from surgery, or release from prison, or a Board Meeting. It is called Birkat Hagomel. *Barukh atah Adonai, hagomel l'hayavim tovot, sh'gmalani kol tov* – blessed are you, Adonai, who bestows goodness on those who are undeserving, who has given me all good things.

The enemy of gratitude is entitlement. When you have worked hard at your job, you usually do not feel a wave of gratitude wash over you when you pick up your paycheck. The attitude of "I deserve it" turns every gift into a paycheck.

The anonymous author of the great ethical treatise, the Orhot Tzaddikim, teaches that an envious man does violence to his own soul, for he is constantly grieving and angry. He tells a parable about two men, one a jealous man and one an envious man who were met by a certain king. The king said to them, "One of you may ask something of me, and I will give it to him, provided I give twice as much to his companion." The envious one did not want to ask first for he was envious of his companion who would receive twice as much, and the jealous man wanted everything – wanted what belonged to both of them, so when the jealous man finally pressed the envious man to ask for something, the envious man asked the king to pluck out one of his eyes, because then his companion would have both eyes plucked out.

Envy and jealousy can do us no good, only harm. Real harm.

The body is impacted as well as the soul. Envy and jealousy extol an enormous price on the body. That is why the Book of Proverbs says "A gentle heart is the life of the flesh, but envy is the decay of the bones." *Proverbs 14:30*. Envy eats you up from the inside. I have to believe that people who are filled with envy and jealousy and lust age quicker and die sooner than those who are filled with gratitude.

Fortunately, there is a vaccine against this soul-sickness. That vaccine is called in Hebrew *hakarat hatov*, which literally means recognizing the good. We Jews are descendants of Judah, who reminds us that what we have – whatever it may be – is "more than our share." We are entitled to nothing. We are grateful to God for everything.

But *hakarat hatov* is more than a feeling.

*Hakarat hatov* teaches us to appreciate the source of every kindness in our life, even when that source is something inanimate. That is why Moshe, in the first two of the 10 Plagues, was not permitted to strike the Nile to turn the water into blood, or smite the earth to bring forth the frogs, but God instructed Moshe to tell Aaron to do it instead. It would have been unseemly for Moshe to strike the Nile because the waters of the Nile protected Moshe when he was a baby. And it would have been improper for him to smite the earth because the earth protected Moshe after he killed the Egyptian taskmaster and buried him in the sand. "Cast no mud into the well from which you have drunk," is the advice found in the Talmud (Bava Kamma 92b). Kindnesses done to us are not to be forgotten, so God made sure that Moshe did not have to violate the imperative of *hakarat hatov*.

It would have been easy for Moshe to forget the kindness that was shown to him by the Nile and by the sand. It would have been easy to be so caught up in the immediacy of what Moshe was doing to miss the connection between the events of his early life and the role he was to play as God's agent in history. But God reminded Moshe – and us – to repay kindness with kindness.

For over a thousand years Jews have been singing *dayenu* at our seder tables. With great gusto we sing, *If God had only done such and such, and not more, it would have been enough*. And every year I ask those sitting at my seder table, after each *dayenu*, I ask them, "Really?" If God had only brought us out of Egypt, it would have been enough? What point was there in letting us wander aimlessly in the wilderness forever? And if God had split the sea for us, and not brought us through on the dry land, it would have been enough? Really? What, we were supposed to stand there and admire the miracle while the Egyptian chariots got closer and closer? And if God had brought us to Mount Sinai, but had not given us the Torah, it would have been enough? Really? What point was there to leave us at the foot of the mountain, and not give us Torah? Would we be who we are without Torah? And without the Shabbat? And without Eretz Yisrael? Would it really have been enough?

Well, yeah, it would have been enough. It would have been enough for us to recognize the kindness of God, to appreciate that each step along the journey we are lucky enough to be taking steps. And to receive each new stage of the journey for what it is: its own blessing.

Eric Hoffer said that the hardest arithmetic to master is that which enables us to count our blessings. That is why Rabbi Meir tells us that we should say 100 *berakhot* every day. 100 times a day we are to thank God, to acknowledge God for our blessings, to sing

about what we have, not lament what we are missing. And the mishnah in Berakhot tells us that we are required to say a berakha for bad things that happen to us just like we say a berakha for the good things that happen. There is a berakha for recognizing the good: Barukh atah Adonai, hatov v'hameytiv – blessed are you, Adonai, the Good and the one who makes good. And there is a berakha for recognizing the bad: Barukh atah Adonai, dayan ha-emet – blessed are you, Adonai, righteous judge.

When I was a student at the Seminary there used to be a Hassidic bookseller, named Mr. Gruber, who would appear in the lobby of the building with armfuls of sefarim that he would sell to us. Somehow, Mr. Gruber instinctively knew what Hebrew book a professor was going to mention two weeks in the future and we should buy now. One day, I walked into the Seminary to find Mr. Gruber with all of his books spread out on the couches. “Mr. Gruber,” I said enthusiastically, “how are you?” He answered, “Barukh hashem, miserable.”

It was the best mishnah lesson I ever had. Thank God, miserable. That’s the Jewish response to the world. I might be miserable now, but thank God, I’m alive, and that is a blessing, and whatever is making me miserable shall pass, and thank God, I am breathing.

Isn’t that a lovely way to go through the world? Do you think you can do that? Do you think you can look for 100 blessings in each of your days? The blessings could start with the simplest of things: being thankful for waking up healthy and on time in the morning. Being thankful for eating a healthy breakfast, and being thankful for a safe commute to work, no matter how bad the traffic. Being thankful for the talents you have. Being thankful for the people in your life. Being thankful that you are alive. I bet by the end of the day you can get to 100.

And then the next day, do it again.

From the first *Modeh ani lefanecha* of the morning, to the final *kriyat shema al hamitah* at night, the attitude meant to be cultivated by prayer is one of gratitude. The *Modeh Ani* expresses thanks for the most elemental gift of all, life itself, to the divine source of life. There were billions of years that existed before we were born, and there will be billions of years that lie ahead of us, after we die. For most of time, we are not here. That we are alive at all is a gift.

When we focus on the *blessings* in each of our lives, we don't take nearly as much time or energy to complain or focus on the negative. There simply isn't any room for it. Instead, we are focusing on our skills and our gifts. Like a talented craftsman, we are creating the best life we can.

Here, then, are the four steps to gratitude: Recognize the good that you possess. Acknowledge that it is a gift, not something you deserve. Identify the source of the gift, whether God or a human being or even something inanimate. Express your thanks in concrete ways.

Because gratitude is the basis for everything: faith, joy, awe, love of God and love of God's creatures. Only when we recognize how much God has given us and how little we deserve it can we come to a place of faith and love. Gratitude increases both the capacity for faith and for love.

While the soul is in the body it only has so much room. So this is my question this Yom Kippur: with what do you want to fill your soul? How do you want to use the limited resources of your soul? And how do you want to grow your soul?

Envy, jealousy and greed can fill up our souls quickly. If we allow envy and jealousy and greed into our souls, there will be room for little else. They will move in, evict all the other inhabitants and redecorate. And then they will invite in their colleagues: bitterness, anger, resentment, conflict.

Cultivating gratitude is the most effective way to grow our souls. If we do, if everyone does, then perhaps Myron Cohen's joke would not remain so funny. If that should happen, no one would be able to understand the meaning of *he had a hat*. And we wouldn't be able to recognize ourselves in it.

And for that, we will all be able to thank God.

G'mar hatimah tovah.