

## **Why Gratitude?**

This Shabbat we are entering B'Midbar, into the Wilderness of Zin and the Wilderness of Paran. We have finished reading the earlier portions of the Israelites circuitous journey through the Wilderness of Egypt and of Shur, the land of Ishmael's descendants. All this time the Israelites, often under the influence of the mixed multitude have complained about the lack of provisions, food and water, and of their desires to have more luxuries, left behind in Egypt, what little there were.

Here we have followed a people who lacked trust in Adonai Elohim and pushed against His instructions until the ungrateful generation had passed on. These were not a people who were grateful for what Adonai gave them but showed hearts hard with self-righteousness and self-centredness.

**Pray for our hearts to receive the message of the benefits of having a heart of gratitude.**

Just in case you are bracing yourselves for another 'churchy' feel-good message, one without substance or depth, rest assured this message will share with you some substantive truth both from Word of Torah and from the application of Torah into the real world. First, I would like to share with you some recent scientific research, longitudinal studies into the many benefits accrued to people through developing an attitude of gratitude.

Over the past decade, there have been in excess of 25 scientific studies into the benefits to human life through developing an attitude of gratitude. As a former university researcher myself, I often read research studies with a skeptical eye, knowing how much 'junk-research' exists from the pressure of publish or perish mentality within universities. And my reading of these studies was no

different. One of the more convincing studies to come out of this line of research originated at the University of California, at Berkley. This 5.6 million dollar study, over a three-year period, examined the effects of gratitude upon the human body and personality. The results are interesting.

Before we go there, though, let's spend a moment to understand how Scripture views gratitude. The psalmist, in Psalm 118 clearly acknowledges Adonai Elohim created the day and advocates for gratitude for His creation, as we read, *This is the day ADONAI has made, a day for us to rejoice and be glad.* (Psalm 118:24) Psalm 136 is focused on showing gratitude to Adonai for all His good works. Listen to the rhythmic quality of these few verses, *Give thanks to ADONAI, for he is good, for his grace continues forever. Give thanks to the God of gods, for his grace continues forever. Give thanks to the Lord of lords, for his grace continues forever.* (Psalm 136:1-3) In Psalm 50, we get a sense of one of the purposes of showing gratitude, *Whoever offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice honors Me; and to him who goes the right way I will show the salvation of God.* (Psalm 50:23) Would you agree honouring our beloved Abba is sufficient reason to be grateful for His works of creation and His salvation? Would you give a resounding HalleluYah to that?

In the Apostolic Scriptures, Rav Sha'ul makes many an impassioned plea for all his disciples to show gratitude to Adonai Elohim. In 1 Thessalonians 5 we read, *In everything give thanks, for this is what God wants from you who are united with the Messiah Yeshua.* (1 Thessalonians 5:18) And, in James 1 we find the Apostle giving us a reason to be grateful, *Every good act of giving and every perfect gift is*

*from above, coming down from the Father who made the heavenly lights; with him there is neither variation nor darkness caused by turning. (James 1:17)*

Well we know showing gratitude to Adonai Tzivaot is an act of worship, as we have read in both the Hebrew and Apostolic Scriptures and for that reason alone we ought to be showing gratitude for everything which occurs in our lives, whether we perceive it positive or negative. And it is to Him and Him only we show our gratitude; showing gratitude to human beings is a form of idolatry, unless we offer this to Adonai Elohim Tzivaot first. I'm not saying we should not thank those who do things for us or who give things to us, in our hour of need. But when we offer gratitude to others, as if they are our providers, we engage in idolatry. In Hosea 2 we get a clear picture of how Adonai Elohim views those who show their gratitude to others and not to Him. The 'woman' about whom Adonai Tzivaot is speaking in these passages represents His Bride: *'I will pursue my lovers, who give me my food and water, wool, flax, olive oil and wine.'* Therefore, *I will block her way with thorns and put up a hedge so she can't find her paths . . . . For she doesn't know it was I who gave her the grain, the wine and the oil; I who increased her silver and gold, which they used for Ba'al.*

In Hebrew, the word for gratitude is שמח, Sameach, which has a range of meaning from joy and gladness to thankfulness and gratitude. When we will say, in a very few weeks, Hag Sameach Shavu'ot, we will be saying a happy Festival of Weeks or the thankfulness/Gratitude of the Festival of Weeks.

The English word 'gratitude' derives from the old French and carries with it the *quality of being thankful; readiness to show appreciation for and to return kindness.* This definition appears to be consistent across many dictionaries. Notice there are two parts to gratitude, the first being a feeling – thankfulness -

and the other an action – showing appreciation and kindness. Like many such qualities, without the action, the feeling is hollow, having little to no substance.

Our society is essentially sensual; this is, there is a predominate desire to feel good about ourselves and our endeavours, irrespective of the value of our efforts to ourselves or others. However, gratitude goes beyond sensation and includes action, giving to others. Does this surprise you? Did you consider gratitude, like faith and love, requires action before it becomes real? We may be grateful, that is an emotion; however, in order for gratitude to be complete, it must be shown. A case in point emerges from the story of Captain Eddie Rickenbacker, the World War One hero. Here is Rickenbacker's story of gratitude, as told by noted broadcaster Paul Harvey

It is gratitude that prompted an old man to visit an old broken pier on the eastern seacoast of Florida. Every Friday night, until his death in 1973, he would return, walking slowly and slightly stooped with a large bucket of shrimp. The sea gulls would flock to this old man, and he would feed them from his bucket. Many years before, in October, 1942, Captain Eddie Rickenbacker was on a mission in a B-17 to deliver an important message to General Douglas MacArthur in New Guinea. But there was an unexpected detour which hurled Captain Eddie into the most harrowing adventure of his life. Somewhere over the South Pacific the Flying Fortress became lost beyond the reach of radio. Fuel ran dangerously low, so the men ditched their plane in the ocean...For nearly a month Captain Eddie and his companions would fight the water, and the weather, and the scorching sun. They spent many sleepless nights recoiling as giant sharks rammed their rafts. The largest raft was nine by five. The biggest being ten feet long.

But of all their enemies at sea, one proved most formidable: starvation. Eight days out, their rations were long gone or destroyed by the salt water. It would take a miracle to sustain them. And a miracle occurred. In Captain Eddie's own words, "Cherry," the B-17 pilot, Captain William Cherry, "read the service that afternoon, and we finished with a prayer for deliverance and a hymn of praise. There was some talk, but it tapered off in the oppressive heat. With my hat pulled down over my eyes to keep out some of the glare, I dozed off. Something landed on my head. I knew that it was a sea gull. I don't know how I knew, I just knew. Everyone else knew too. No one said a word, but peering out from under my hat brim without moving my head, I could see the expression on their faces. They were staring at that gull.

The gull meant food, if I could catch it." Rickenbacker caught the gull; Its flesh was eaten, while Its intestines were used for bait to catch fish. The survivors were sustained and their hopes renewed because a lone sea gull, uncharacteristically hundreds of miles from land, offered itself as a sacrifice. And now you also know he never forgot. Because every Friday evening, about sunset, on a lonely stretch along the eastern Florida seacoast...you could see an old man walking, white-haired, bushy-eyebrowed, slightly bent. His bucket filled with shrimp was to feed the gulls to remember the one which, on a day long past, gave itself without a struggle, like manna in the wilderness.

How, then, do we show our gratitude? William Arthur Ward, a prolific writer of tracts and articles and the author of Fountains of Faith, wrote, "Feeling gratitude and not expressing it is like wrapping a present and not giving it." Here are some appropriate approaches to showing gratitude:

1. **Telling others** how their involvement with you has helped you grow. One of the more important needs human beings have is to believe we have made a difference. There is value in sharing with others how their behaviours, their teaching, their being have made a difference to our lives. Try sharing this with another person and notice their reaction: You have helped me grow and become a better person, when you . . . But, I caution you, this must be authentic or the very statement may tarnish credibility, if it is not authentically shared.
2. **Paying-it-Forward.** Has someone every paid something forward for you? Have you felt gratitude because of that? I remember the very first time I walked to a Tim Horton's counter and asked for a coffee. When I reached for my wallet, the clerk told me it was already paid. I asked who did this and she replied someone had paid for my coffee but she had no idea who it was. I was very curious and at the same time quite humbled and thankful for this gesture. I immediately gave the clerk a five dollar bill to pay forward. Even through that small gesture I felt good.
3. **Really listen to someone, when they talk with you.** If you don't think authentic listening is not a display of gratitude, think again. This type of listening is called active listening, because it requires active involvement, when someone else is talking. When we give of ourselves to listen to others, we are showing gratitude to them. This is a selfless act; we are inviting them into our lives by listening without interrupting, as much as they are inviting us into their lives by sharing with us.
4. **Encouragement.** Here is an action which carries great dividends. Encouragement affirms and validates others' actions, especially when they

make a difference in the lives of others. However, it is essential the encouragement be authentic and not false. False encouragement will be seen quite clearly by the discerning and will destroy the credibility of the one giving.

5. **Offer assistance.** When we give of ourselves to help others, the message we project is they are worthy to us and worthy for us to share their work or task. This can open other doors for conversation and social and/or spiritual development.

Now to the heart of the issue – how do we benefit through the action of showing gratitude? As I mentioned earlier, scientific research has discovered a link between displaying gratitude and healthy lives. The domains of these health benefits include our physical, emotional and social health, as well as improvements in personality and career development. Today I wish to share with you just a few of the many, many benefits of displaying the gratitude we feel for what Adonai Elohim has given us.

Dr. Robert A. Emmons of the University of California, Davis, Dr. Michael E. McCullough of the University of Miami and Dr. Martin E. P. Seligman, a psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania, have conducted much of the scientific research on gratitude and its impact on human health. Their studies have shown maintaining a gratitude journal, keeping track of the things for which we are grateful, demonstrated statistically significant increase in time spent in physical exercise, more sleep and, more importantly, increased quality of sleep. Significant decrease was observed in chronic physical pain and symptoms of health issues.

When the researchers investigated the impact of people displaying the gratitude they felt, they found significant evidence in the emotional domain of human life, such as being more relaxed, less tense, less anxiety, greater resilience and a greater degree of personal happiness. In the area of relationship health, the researchers discovered positive correlations between demonstrations of gratitude and stronger marriages, deeper relationships with others and increased displays of kindness to others. Studies into the correlation between gratitude and personality revealed evidence of significant ties to gratitude and a decreased emphasis on materialism, decreased self-centredness, increased self-esteem and, the focus of this message, a deeper relationship with God.

Even though Jeremiah worked for Adonai for forty years, without a single sign of success, he was sustained, for the most part, by his gratitude for what El Shaddai gave him. Listen to the prophet's gratitude in Lamentations 3: *But in my mind I keep returning to something, something that gives me hope - that the grace of ADONAI is not exhausted, that his compassion has not ended. [On the contrary,] they are new every morning! How great your faithfulness!*

(Lamentations 3:21-23) If we began each new day in this way, what do you think might happen to our relationship with our beloved Abba? Would we feel closer to Him, if we acknowledged His grace was ever-flowing, inexhaustible? I challenge you to begin each day recognizing His faithfulness in our lives and not feel greater intimacy with the Lover of our souls. And when you go to bed each night, try sharing with Abba the things for which you are grateful. Tell Him how grateful you are for the people He put across your path this day; for the experiences you have had and the learnings resulting from them; for the blessings you have recognized being bestowed upon you and for the blessings you have



received and not noticed. Having done that, I ask you to observe any difference in the quality of your sleep, over time.

In James 1 we read, *Having made his decision, He gave birth to us through a Word that can be relied upon, in order that we should be a kind of firstfruits of all that He created.* (James 1:18) Reflect upon this passage and focus on the Truth of His Word – He made the decision, of His own free will, to create us through our Messiah Yeshua. There was no hesitation to the decision He made; this was an act of love, in that we would have a relationship with Him based on love. The result of His decision is that we are a firstfruit of His creation. Rav Sha’ul infers this in Romans 8, where he writes, *I don’t think the sufferings we are going through now are even worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed to us in the future. The creation waits eagerly for the sons of God to be revealed.* (Romans 8:19)

Beloved, there is so much to gain through feeling grateful for what He has given us and for actualizing our gratitude through showing kindness, generosity, love and honour to others. I challenge you this day to one act of gratitude before you leave the synagogue and then to share that gratitude with Him tonight. I urge you to observe your acts of gratitude for the week and be able to report to Kehilah their impact on your lives. For now, I invite a few of you to share your gratitude briefly with all of us. Please come forward and allow us to receive the blessings of how grateful you are.

(after appropriate sharing) **Pray each one of us will increase our acts of gratitude and bestow our blessings on others.**