

# Gratitude

Gratitude does not come easy in a world where people seem to always be looking to have more, to own more, to acquire more and more. The media bombard us with the feeling that we “need” things: newer versions of phones or computers, the latest most fashionable shoes or clothing, watches or jewelry. In a world that is filled with a seemingly endless stream of “new and improved” products, how do parents go about conveying to children a sense of contentment and gratefulness for what they already have?

This lesson, adapted from a course of study entitled **Foundations of Jewish Family Living**, will explore the various hurdles to expressing and feeling gratitude, as well as offer some sound advice as to how we can begin to practice gratitude in a way that will make a lasting impression upon our children.

## Gratitude

### *Jacob Prepares to Meet Esau - Genesis (Bereshit) 32: 4-13*

Amidst fear of his impending encounter with his estranged brother, Esau, Jacob offers heartfelt gratitude for all of the goodness shown to him, and prays for God’s continued protection. *The following is a child-friendly retell version of the original Biblical text, included as a helpful way of sharing this story with young children.*

Jacob and his family left the House of Laban to return home to Canaan. As they got closer, Jacob called a few of his servants to his side. He said to them, "Go ahead of me into Canaan and tell my brother Esau that I am coming. Tell him I have been working with Uncle Laban the past twenty years and I have many herds, flocks, and servants. Tell him I wish to come in peace," Jacob instructed. "Then come back and tell me if he is glad I am coming or if he is angry."

The servants ran on ahead as they were told, and it wasn't long until they came back to Jacob with a report. "Esau is coming to meet you!" they exclaimed. "He has 400 men with him."

Hearing those words made Jacob greatly afraid. The servants didn't say whether Esau was coming in peace or if Esau still hated him and brought those 400 men to make war and kill him. Jacob decided it was in his best interest to prepare for the worst. He instructed his servants to divide all the flocks, herds, and camels into two groups. One group would go ahead of Jacob and his family, and the other group would follow behind. He reasoned that if Esau was angry and was coming to make war, the first group might all be killed but he and his family and the second group would have enough warning that they could turn around and escape. After dividing all his animals into two groups, Jacob found himself a place to pray. "O God of my grandfather Abraham and of my father Isaac, you told me to return to Canaan. You promised that all would be well. You have blessed me with so much – great wealth and a wonderful large family. Please protect me from Esau. I am scared that he will kill all of my family. You said you would do good to me and bless my family. Please keep your promise."

The next day, Jacob looked into the distance and could see Esau coming toward him with his 400 men. He divided his children into four groups with their mothers, and then he ran in front of them to meet Esau, bowing seven times as he made his approach. Esau was also running to meet Jacob, and gave him a big bear hug, and kissed him, and they both wept tears of joy at seeing one another after so many long years.

### *Analysis of our story....*

This passage exemplifies an important foundation of Jewish prayer: that even when one is in great need and turns to God in prayer with a serious, heartfelt petition for help, it is important to first take account of the good things in one's life. Although Jacob feels greatly distressed, he has the presence of mind to be thankful for what he does have, for his economic success and for the large family he has fathered (verse 11). Though expressing gratitude is certainly commendable, it is not that easy to do, especially when one is focused on what is missing, on one's needs and desires. In fact, even Jacob only expresses his appreciation for his blessings after he has first expressed his frustration to God that it was after all God's command that sent Jacob and his family on this dangerous journey home in the first place! Then he takes a step back, to be thankful for what he does have, and asks that God protect his family from harm.

### *Questions for Discussion:*

- ❖ Our rabbis teach that there are three kinds of prayer: thanking God, praising God, and asking for something. What kind of prayer was Jacob's prayer?
- ❖ Why do you think the Torah gives us this example of a prayer that both says thank you and asks for something?
- ❖ What keeps us from being thankful more often?

### *Text 1*

#### **Mishnah, Tractate Avot 4: 1**

[Compilation of teachings of 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE – 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE scholars in *Eretz Yisrael (Tanna'im)*;  
compiled and edited by Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi]

Ben Zoma said... Who is considered rich? One who is satisfied with his lot.

משנה, מסכת אבות ד: א

בן זומא אומר... איזהו עשיר השמם בחלקו.

### *Analysis – Text 1*

**One who finds satisfaction with what he has in life is the one who is truly wealthy.**

What is wealth? Most would define it as the extensive accumulation of possessions, riches, and money. One's level of wealth is a function of the total value of one's physical and monetary assets.

In a somewhat unexpected fashion, ben Zoma equates true wealth with satisfaction. Ben Zoma is not suggesting a person need be satisfied with whatever he has without ambition for advancement; rather, at every stage, a person should rejoice in his portion, be thankful and grateful for what she has, and strive for those things which are within reach. Measuring the quality of people's daily lives via surveys, the results of a study published in the June 30, 2006 issue of the journal *Science* ("Would You Be Happier If You Were Richer? A Focusing Illusion" – Vol. 312, pp. 1908-1910) reveals that income plays a rather insignificant role in day-to-day happiness. If one's goal is to find satisfaction in and feel and express gratitude for what one has, then, according to ben Zoma, one will truly feel rich.

### *Questions for consideration:*

- ❖ Are there certain moments in life when ben Zoma's message is clearer than others?
- ❖ Under what circumstances is it more difficult to be grateful for what we have without wanting more?

### *Text 2*

#### **Dr. Wendy Mogel, Cultivating an Attitude of Gratitude**

[Clinical psychologist and educator, specializing in parenting and Jewish values]

In order to effectively teach children gratitude, we parents must start with ourselves. If you lift your mood by a trip to the mall or try to maintain your status by keeping up with the Orensteins, your children will pick up the not-very-hidden message that acquiring things is a way to reward yourself, feel important, or cheer yourself up. Even if we manage to get our children to stop asking for so many things, they still won't learn how to be grateful unless they see us practicing gratitude. No one is born feeling grateful; it's an acquired skill....[If] you want to nurture appreciation and downplay desire in yourself and your children, here are a few behaviors that might help:

Try not to let a visit to the mall become your most frequent family outing. Consider visiting friends; taking a trip to the park, museum, or library; or going for a walk around the neighborhood instead.

Avoid frequent conversations about how much you want to own things you see advertised on television.

Don't use the word *need* when you really mean *want*.

Notice how much you verbalize your envy for other people's things in front of the children.

Don't let mail-order catalogs pile up; try not to let your children see you spending lots of time reading catalogs or shopping online.

Teach your children nonmonetary ways to delay gratification. For instance, instead of doing a lot of shopping for a forthcoming vacation, you might say, "I'm really excited about going to Arizona next month. Let's go to the library and check out some books on the Grand Canyon."

[...]

Stopping before eating in order to bless food is a ubiquitous religious practice because it's natural – every time we eat we have a choice between gluttony or gratitude to God. The rabbis really refined this one. There are special blessings for different occasions and different kinds of food. All of these prayers can help build an attitude of gratitude throughout the day.

[Mogel, W. (2001). *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee: Using Jewish Teachings to Raise Self-Reliant Children*. NY: Penguin, pp. 124-128]

### ***Analysis – Text 2***

#### ***Gratitude begins with attitude. Daily blessings offer a way to practice being grateful.***

Mogel makes the strong point that it is not sufficient to teach our children to be grateful and to express gratitude; first and foremost, it is our obligation to model gratitude. It is also not sufficient for our children to hear us saying thank you; rather, it is incumbent upon us to live our lives in a way that projects satisfaction and gratitude. What we do with our leisure time, the emphasis we place on shopping, and even the language we use to describe the things we desire in life all contribute to this. One might say that this is a case where actions speak louder than words.

Mogel reminds us of a classic Jewish training system for helping to develop a sense of appreciation for daily food – *berakhot*. Although one might assume that blessings are recited only in order to praise and pay tribute to God, Mogel suggests that the recitation of blessings is also a formula for developing a sense of gratitude on a daily basis. Stopping and pausing before eating serves as a continual mechanism for developing a grateful personality.

### *Questions for Consideration:*

- ❖ What are the influences that make it difficult to maintain a sense of gratitude in our daily lives?
- ❖ What is the significance of using the word *want* rather than *need*?
- ❖ What additional advice might you add to Mogel's list?

### *More Topics for Discussion with Children*

- What things stand in our way of feeling or expressing gratitude?
- Why is it so hard sometimes to say thank-you to friends, or to brothers and sisters?
- Why is gratitude an important part of being a good guest?
- Take a look in a siddur – what are some of things for which the siddur guides us to be thankful?
- What is the significant difference between saying “I want” something and “I need” something?

### Ages 1-3

**All of Me: A Book of Thanks** by Molly Bang

This book speaks of saying thanks and being grateful for our body with all of its wonderful parts and abilities.



### Ages 2-4

**Boker Tov** by Rabbi Joe Black

Discusses the need to be grateful for each day and to thank God for the “food we eat and the earth beneath our feet”.

### Ages 5-10

**Bagels from Benny** by Aubrey Davis

Benny searches for a way to pray to God and say Thank you for all God has given him. Benny decides to give God bagels as a way of thanking Him for all that He has done. Benny soon learns just how powerful prayer can be. Not only does his prayer help a poor, hungry man, but it prompts this man to increase his own acts of goodness. Benny learns that being kind to others is often a wonderful way to pray to God.

### Ages 7-12

**The Always Prayer Shawl** by Sheldon Oberman

When Adam moves from Europe to America, his tallit and the act of praying in synagogue help to give him a sense of comfort and continuity (Helps to make him feel as if he is not so far away from his grandfather.) When Adam the boy becomes a grandfather, he passes the tallit on to his grandson - helping his grandson understand that while many things change, some things (like enjoying the feeling of praying in synagogue) always remain the same.



www.shalomsesame.org

Watch [Todah](#), where Seth teaches Elmo how to show gratitude and say “thank-you” in Hebrew.

*This short discussion piece of learning is part of a twenty-lesson course entitled the Foundations of Jewish Family Living, specially designed for parents of young children by the Florence Melton School of Adult Jewish Learning.*

*For more information about this course and other adult learning opportunities, visit our website:*

**[www.meltonschool.org](http://www.meltonschool.org)**