Fruits of Patience

Patience doesn't mean that we become passive. We still need to make a genuine effort to set the pace and trajectory of our lives, but we don't need to react to every delay or deflection as if it were a denial, whether that means a denial of our selves or a denial by God. In those moments when I am good at being patient, I live in the here and the now, without straining against reality. I walk a middle path, not leaning to the one extreme of being inactive and fatalistic—because that way I negate the powers I do have, limited though they might be—nor veering to the other, where impatience reigns.

There is a story in the Talmud[9] about Rav Preida, who had a student who was so slow that he could not grasp a lesson unless his teacher taught it to him four hundred times. One day, while Rav Preida was teaching this student, someone came and told the rabbi that he needed his services when he had finished teaching. That day, after he had completed the four hundredth repetition, Rav Preida asked the student if he had grasped the lesson, to which the student replied that he had not. "Why is it different today than other days?" the teacher asked, and his student answered that from the moment the other person had come to speak to Rav Preida, the student had been distracted, thinking to himself, "Soon the master will have to get up . . . Soon the master will have to get up . . ." Rav Preida then replied, "If that is so, let me teach you the lesson again." He then repeated the teaching an additional four hundred times. When he had finished, a heavenly voice called out to Rav Preida, "Which reward do you want? Either four hundred years will be added to your life, or you and your generation will be received into the World-to-Come." He answered, "I request that my generation and I merit the World-to-Come." To this the heavenly voice replied, "Give him *both!*"

Such are the fruits of patience.

9

Gratitude

HAKARAT HA'TOV

Awaken to the good and give thanks.

Ben Zoma used to say: "A good guest says, 'How much my host toiled for me! He put so much meat in front of me, so much wine, so much bread—all his exertion was just for me!' A bad guest says, 'What did my host toil for me? I ate just one roll, just one piece of meat, I drank just one cup—all his exertion was for his own household!'"

—Babylonian Talmud: *B'rachot* 58a

A PSALM OF THANKSGIVING

Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth.
Worship the Lord with gladness;
come into his presence with singing.
Know that the Lord is God.
It is he that made us, and we are his;
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.
Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise.
Give thanks to him, bless his name.
For the Lord is good;
his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.

—Psalms/*Tehillim* 100

THE HEBREW TERM for gratitude is *hakarat ha'tov,* which means, literally, "recognizing the good." The good is already there. Practicing gratitude means being fully aware of the good that is already yours.

If you've lost your job but you still have your family and health, you have something to be grateful for.

If you can't move around except in a wheelchair but your mind is as sharp as ever, you have something to be grateful for.

If your house burns down but you still have your memories, you have something to be grateful for.

If you've broken a string on your violin, and you still have three more, you have something to be grateful for.

What's Good in Your Life?

When you open yourself to experience the trait of gratitude, you discover with clarity and accuracy how much good there is in your life. Whatever you are lacking will still be missing, of course, and in reaching for gratitude no one is saying you ought to put on rose-colored glasses to obscure those shortcomings. The obstacles to appreciating the good can also be very real, especially when life is riven by suffering. But it is worth the effort to practice gratitude, especially since the one who benefits most is the one who is suffering. Recognizing the good affirms life, and more, because when you see the good in the world it sets your heart free to soar, to shout, and to sing a song of life.

Most of us tend to focus so heavily on the deficiencies in our lives that we barely perceive the good that counterbalances them. This tendency is bolstered by advertisers who attempt to convince us of just how inadequate and lacking we really are, in the hope we will try to plug our wants and needs by buying some product or other.

There is no limit to what we don't have, and if that is where we focus, then our lives are inevitably filled with endless dissatisfaction. It is also true that even if we are aware of our gifts, we tend to grow callous to those fine things that pepper our lives, so that after a while we no longer even see that they are there. We come to take the good for granted. When gratitude is a living reality well established in our hearts, however, we constantly refresh our vision so that we make accurate note of the good that surrounds us. This is the ethos that lies behind the ancient proverb, which asks, "Who is rich?" and then answers, "He who rejoices in his own lot."[1]

Live like that and you will suddenly discover that you want to give thanks for anything or anyone who has benefited you, whether they meant to or not. Imagine a prayer of thanks springing to your lips when the driver in the next car lets you merge without protest, or when there is electricity to light your room, or the food is adequate. Giving thanks can become a flow that waters the fields of life.

When gratitude is well established and flowing, it is a sign of a heart that has been made right and whole. Gratitude can't coexist with arrogance, resentment, and selfishness. The Chassidic teacher Rebbe Nachman of Breslov writes, "Gratitude rejoices with her sister joy and is always ready to light a candle and have a party. Gratitude doesn't much like the old cronies of boredom, despair, and taking life for granted."

Grateful to Whom, or What?

To what and whom should we feel thankful? In the Torah, when Moses is bringing down the plagues on Egypt, it isn't he who initiated turning the Nile River into blood and bringing frogs from the river. His brother Aaron invokes those plagues. The medieval commentator Rashi explains that the river had protected Moses when he was an infant, and therefore he could not send a plague against it. God was teaching Moses a powerful lesson in gratitude: we can open in gratitude even to inanimate objects.

Whenever Rabbi Menachem Mendel Morgenstern, the Kotzker Rebbe, would replace a worn-out pair of shoes, he would neatly wrap up the old ones in newspaper before placing them in the trash, and he would declare, "How can I simply toss away such a fine pair of shoes that have served me so well these past years?" I felt the same way when I gave away my old Honda that had ferried me and my family so reliably for eighteen years.

There is a story about the Mussar teacher Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian,[2] who was talking to a student after prayers and at the same time was folding up his *tallis* (prayer shawl). The *tallis* was large, and he had to rest it on a bench to fold it. After he had finished the folding, Reb Elyah noticed that the bench was dusty, and so he headed out to fetch a towel in order to clean the bench. The student to whom he was speaking realized what Reb Elyah was doing and ran to get the towel for him. Reb Elyah held up his hand. "No! No! I must clean it myself, for I must show my gratitude to the bench upon which I folded my *tallis*."[3]

Now if we learn from these stories that we can be grateful to rivers, shoes, cars, and benches, which help us involuntarily, how much more so to human beings who have free will and who help us consciously out of the goodness of their hearts? Or to the mysterious source out of which our lives have come?

When Leah, wife of the patriarch Jacob, had her fourth child, she named him "Yehuda," which means "I am grateful."[4] The name Jew derives from "Yehudi," the people of "Yehuda," revealing that gratitude is intrinsic to being Jewish. This idea is confirmed in the prayer book, where so many of the prayers express gratitude to God for all we have. Astoundingly, the prayer to God, "Who is good and does good,"[5] which is part of the blessing after eating, was introduced directly after the defeat of the Bar Kochba revolt and the fall of the fortress of Betar, where thousands of people were slain by the legions of Rome.[7] When the remains of the martyrs of Betar finally received proper burial, the sages ordained the recitation of this blessing for the goodness of God, as they found the goodness even within—maybe especially within—a catastrophe. This is their lesson to us.

In our lives, the Torah asks us to recite blessings for everything, from the most mundane activities, like eating, to the most extraordinary, like seeing a rainbow or the ocean, all of which help us focus on and appreciate that which we might otherwise take for granted.

Leah was thankful to God for the gift of another son, and our daily blessings focus on God's bounty as well. The fact is, however, that many people find it easier to thank God than to acknowledge the gifts received from other people. People are complex, and they give in such confounding ways. This can make it so much harder to feel grateful for their gifts or to thank them. But we need to be ready to give thanks to a fellow human being, even if he or she has not done anything special for us. Why? Because the soul-trait of gratitude holds the key to opening the heart. It is an elevated soul-trait, and a fine orientation to the inanimate, human, and divine dimensions of the world. The refined soul is a grateful soul.

Gratitude Doesn't Come Easy

Yet gratitude often doesn't come easily to us, and it usually takes some effort to develop this quality through practice. When we practice gratitude,

we make an effort to heighten our awareness of the gifts we already possess, and so relieve ourselves of the exhausting pursuit of the ever-receding targets of those things we think we lack. No wonder gratitude satisfies the soul. It frees us from compulsive grasping, and so gives us back our lives.

In the Mussar classic *Duties of the Heart,* Rabbi Bachya ibn Pakuda tells us that there isn't a person alive who hasn't been given gifts, if only the gifts of life and hope, but we tend to suffer a kind of blindness that keeps us from seeing and appreciating what we have. He identifies three reasons why we fail to see the abundance in our lives for which we ought to be grateful, and it's worth paying attention to what he says because his insights are as true for us today as they were nearly one thousand years ago when he wrote them. As you read these points, see if you can identify how these factors play out in your own life and keep you from the gratitude that is the soul's satisfaction.

First, he says we tend not to feel appreciative because we are too absorbed in worldly things and in the enjoyment of them. He points out that physical pleasures can never be fully gratified and so we pursue them endlessly, which keeps us from gratitude for what we have.

Second, we are so used to our gifts that we don't even really see them any more. We have grown so accustomed to them that they appear to us as typical, permanent, unremarkable features of our lives. Because we just take them for granted, we don't see all the good that is in our lives, for which we really could and should be grateful.

And third, we are so focused on the travails and afflictions we suffer in this world that we forget that both our very being and all we own are among the good things that have been gifted to us.

The result of this foolishness, Rabbi Ibn Pakuda concludes, is that "many good things are left unenjoyed, and the happiness to be had from them becomes tainted either because people do not recognize the good in it, or they do not realize its value."[7]

This voice from a millennium ago is saying things that seem to be equally applicable to our lives today. Isn't he pointing to the common feelings of entitlement that keep many of us from recognizing the good and being grateful? We are experts in wanting and complaining, and even if the problems are real and things aren't perfect, we don't give due appreciation to what we already have in hand. Yes, the glass is certainly half empty, but

it is also half full. Someone once challenged me, "What could a prisoner in a concentration camp be grateful for?" "Being alive," I answered.

Even for the Challenges

The poem "Thanks," by W. S. Merwin, includes the lines:

> back from a series of hospitals back from a mugging
> after funerals we are saying thank you
> after the news of the dead
> whether or not we knew them we are saying thank you
> in a culture up to its chin in shame
> living in the stench it has chosen we are saying thank you[8]

And it goes on to describe all sorts of other contemporary issues, and still the chorus resounds, "We are saying thank you."

How can that be? Why on earth would anyone want to say thank you for the police at the back door, the beatings, the crooks, the animals dying around us, the forests falling faster than the minutes?

Merwin is challenging us to stretch to a very radical kind of gratitude. What he is proposing won't be easy or natural for us, because he is throwing open the simple certainties of "good" and "bad" through which we tend to see the world. But how useful and even true are these categories? We cheer for the good that happens to us and mourn for the bad, but are we really in a position to pass such clear judgment as to which is which? How certain can we be that something that happens to us is really for our good, and something else bad?

A story about the sage Rabbi Akiva says this perfectly. He used to say, "A person should always make it a habit of saying, 'Whatever the All-Merciful does, He does for the good.'" He backed this up with a story from his own experience.

Once, Rabbi Akiva was walking along the way accompanied by a rooster, a donkey, and a lamp. He came to a certain place and looked for room at the inn, but he was turned away. When that happened, he said, "Whatever the All-Merciful does, He does for the good." So he went with his rooster, donkey, and lamp and spent the night in an open field.

The wind came and put out the lamp, a weasel came and ate the rooster, a lion came and ate the donkey. He said, "Whatever the All-Merciful does, He does for the good."

On that very night, a marauding troop came to that town and took into captivity everyone in the town. Rabbi Akiva was spared.[9] Had his rooster crowed, had the donkey brayed, had the light glowed, he would have been discovered.

The message is clear. How can we evaluate what is happening right now when we don't know what will happen next? It's only against the contours of that bigger picture that we can grasp the meaning and direction of our present circumstances. Only then can we possibly know what is good and what is bad—and even then we can't really be sure because events continue to unfold. "Did I not tell you?" Rabbi Akiva concluded. "Whatever the All-Merciful does, He does for the good."

Blessings in Disguise

It isn't hard to find real-life examples of terrible things that befell people that turned out in the end to be "blessings in disguise."

What spared my teacher Mrs. Perr's family from destruction in the Holocaust was the "disaster" that occurred when the invading Russians exiled her family from Poland to Siberia early in World War II. It was this harsh fate that took them out of the path of the Nazis and spared their lives.

I met a Holocaust survivor who had emerged from the war penniless, stateless, and traumatized. He left Europe behind and made his way to Uruguay. He and his family lived in South America for many years, until they left that unstable place to settle in the United States. They were able to immigrate because they had become quite wealthy. The source of their wealth was a veritable monopoly the family held on the manufacture of soap in Uruguay. The patriarch of the family had learned how to make soap as a forced laborer in a concentration camp.

In my own life, had it not been for the painful downturn in my own business fortunes that I wrote about in *Climbing Jacob's Ladder,* I never would have discovered Mussar, and I would not be writing these words today.

As we continually try to make sense of our experiences, there is wisdom in receiving whatever comes our way with an attitude of thankfulness. This

attitude reflects an "advanced" level of gratitude practice. The method here is to set ourselves to seeing that even in the troubles we face in this world, we can find good and something to be grateful for. Just because our limited human eyes don't permit us to perceive that the apparent disaster that has landed in our lap will turn out to be for the best, when we cultivate that very attitude, its truth begins to become visible to us. The Mishnah goes so far in this direction as to instruct that "one is obligated to say a blessing for evil."[10] The sage Rava explained that this teaching was given "to indicate that one must accept [evil] with gladness."

The rabbis challenged him, asking for examples of how this can be the case. The answer that comes back is that our limited vision doesn't permit us to know with any certainty what is good and what is bad, despite appearances:

> For instance, if a flood took one's land. Eventually that will be a good thing, because his land gets covered with sediment and becomes more fertile. Now, however, it is a bad thing. And in regard to a good thing, like, for instance, if one found something, it appears for the moment as a good thing even though it will become a disadvantage to him because if the government hears about it, it will confiscate the object from him.[11]

From where we stand at this moment, we just can't know which is which, and so we bless for the good and we bless for the apparently bad, too.

There is a famous individual in the Talmud,[12] named Nachum Ish Gamzu, who personifies this attitude. He is a righteous person who comes to the last days of his life destitute, blind, without the use of his limbs, and beset with illness. And yet as each of these devastating conditions descends on him, no matter what is happening to him, he always says of it: "*Gam zu l'tovah*"—"And that is also for the good."[13]

One story involving Nachum Ish Gamzu took place when the Jews wanted to send a gift to the court of Caesar and the pious Nachum was chosen to be the emissary. He set off with a chest filled with gems and pearls. Along the way, some people secretly made off with his jewels and refilled the chest with ordinary dirt. When he discovered the switch, Nachum's response was only to say *gam zu l'tovah*—this too is for the good—and to carry on with his mission. Other equally disastrous events take place and he responds in just the same way. How could that be? How could it be for the best to find yourself having just presented a gift of a bucket of dirt to an enraged Roman emperor? The answer is that at this point, the story isn't over.

Enter prophet Elijah (in disguise). He reveals that the dirt in the chest actually has magic properties. Caesar is overjoyed and rewards Nachum by refilling his chest with jewels and sending him on his way with great honor. *Gam zu l'tovah*—that too is for the best.[14]

Here is the practice. When something apparently "good" happens to you, you offer the blessing, "And *that* is also for the good." And if something "bad" happens to you, "And *that* is also for the good." On the last broadcast of his television show, when the comedian Jerry Lewis was being thrown off the air, he quoted the saying that Nachum Ish Gamzu referred to above, which Lewis had learned from his mother: "*Gam zu l'tovah,*" he said on camera. "And that is also for the good." No doubt this is a difficult spiritual practice, but when done sincerely, it has a powerful impact on your life.

Saying Thank You

Though there is great spiritual value in seeking the good in everything that happens, we have to be careful not to set ourselves up to being too much of a Pollyanna. All we want is to affirm that in everything that happens there is the possibility of good, if only we could perceive it, and while it may not be visible now, perhaps in time we'll see the bigger picture. And perhaps that bigger picture will include dimensions that are beyond this world and beyond our known experience, as the Jewish tradition affirms repeatedly in telling us that the real recompense for our lives is not in this world but in the World-to-Come.

We have a tendency to live our lives mired in our feelings of deprivation. No one has to look far to find someone who has more money, or is taller, healthier, or luckier in love. Comparing ourselves like this can create bitterness in the soul, as we poison ourselves with judgment, grasping, and self-recrimination. Cultivating gratitude counterbalances this tendency. When we take on the curriculum of reminding ourselves to be grateful, we

change our perception of our lives, and with that, we actually change our lives, too.

In undertaking to practice gratitude, it is important to call thankfulness to mind and then to express and act on the feeling of gratefulness we have fostered.

This is just what I found myself doing one week when I was working on the soul-trait of gratitude. During that very week, I got an e-mail from a student who was very unhappy because of all the things she saw to be wrong with the Mussar course she was taking. As far as I could tell, all the problems were on her end, like the fact that she had an old computer that didn't like attachments, and that she seemed to be so overwrought that she was blaming instead of problem-solving. Taking the whole situation into account, I offered her a partial refund on her course fee. That seemed fair to me, but obviously not to her, because she sent me back an even more aggressive response, one that got under my skin. Even though what we were arguing over was less than $100, I sat down to write her a blistering reply that would be sure to put her in her place. Just then, the unbidden thought of "gratitude" flickered into my mind. Remember that you are cultivating gratitude, I reminded myself. What can you find to be grateful for in this situation? Nothing was evident to my eyes at that moment, so I determined that I would not reply to her until I could begin my response with the words "I am grateful to you for . . ."

The first few ideas that came to my mind had to be thrown out. "I am grateful to you for being an idiot." "I am grateful to you for showing me just how wrong a person can be." Meanwhile, I calmed down, and then it struck me that there was, in fact, one thing in this vein that I could validly say. I could say to her, "I am grateful to you for showing me what this situation looks like from your point of view." This was true. She was telling me what the unsatisfactory situation looked like to her (even though it was her radically different viewpoint that was so infuriating).

Once I had settled on articulating my gratitude to her for sharing her perspective, I was able to see that her position actually had validity, too. If I had bought a toaster at the department store, I told myself, and I took it back after a few weeks because it wasn't working for me, I'd expect a full refund. That's just how she saw this situation. Standing on my rights, we had a fight on our hands. Liberated by the practice of gratitude, I could see the situation from two perspectives, both of which had merit.

I gave her back her money, and we both came away from the situation satisfied.

An Attitude of Gratitude

You can see from this story that gratitude does not just mean uttering a polite thank you when someone confers a benefit. The goal is to do the work it takes to weave thankfulness deeply into the very fabric of your being, permeating everything you do. To achieve that level, said Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz,[15] you must "keep talking like a fishwife" (i.e., endlessly) about everything you receive.

Although gratitude practice requires that we put our feelings into action, the essence of the soul-trait is the inner attitude we maintain. We learn this from a story told about this same Rabbi Levovitz. The rabbi had a special fund from which his yeshiva students could borrow money. One year a young man borrowed some money to travel home for Passover.

On returning to the yeshiva, the student returned the money and expressed his thanks. Immediately his teacher reproached him because there is a Jewish value that when a beneficiary expresses gratitude, he or she diminishes the good deed and undercuts the selflessness of the doer. The boy got the message.

The next year, the same boy again borrowed money from the fund to travel home. This time, though, he had learned his lesson and returned the money without a word.

"Where's your gratitude?" Rabbi Levovitz chided him.

The baffled student burst out, "But Rebbe, last year I thanked you, and you rebuked me. This year, I didn't thank you, and again you rebuked me. What am I supposed to do?"

His teacher explained, "It is certainly forbidden for you to express any verbal thanks in this situation. But the *feeling* of gratitude inside you should have been so strong that it would have been hard for you to remain silent. I didn't see you experiencing any struggle to remain silent."

This story points out that the very essence of gratitude lies in the heart and not in behavior. An inner attitude or stance of thankfulness provides us with resources that help us face whatever we encounter in our lives. A grateful heart is a solid platform from which to reach out to take care of

others as well as ourselves because this orients us toward the resources we have, not what we lack. An attitude of optimism and joy ensues, and it is to foster that outlook that we practice gratitude throughout our day. The intention is that the seeds we plant in practice will sprout, and then we will find ourselves experiencing flashes of gratitude as we go about the ordinary activities of our life.

> It is good to give thanks to the Lord
> And to sing praises to Your name, O Most High
> To proclaim Your goodness in the morning
> And Your faithfulness at night.
>
> —Psalms/*Tehillim* 92

10

Compassion

RACHAMIM

Kindness, empathy, and care arise from standing so close, feeling what the other feels.

> Compassion is an extremely noble trait. It is one of the thirteen traits attributed to the Holy One, Blessed be He, as it is written: "Compassionate and gracious."[1] All that one can do in cultivating this trait, he should exert himself to do. Just as one would want compassion in his time of need, so should one have compassion on others who are in need.
>
> —*Orchot Tzaddikim*

THE MORAL PRECEPTS of Judaism demand that we be compassionate to every soul. Singled out repeatedly as especially needing our compassion are the poor, widows, orphans, and others in need. The Torah repeatedly hammers away at our obligation to help those who are vulnerable and needy. The tradition is so insistent that we be living vessels of compassion that the Talmud asserts that "anyone who is not compassionate with people is certainly not a descendant of our forefather Abraham."[2]

The Hebrew term for compassion—*rachamim*—shares its linguistic root with the word *rechem,* which means "womb." That compassion is somehow connected to motherhood has led many commentators to link this soul-trait to the emotional bond of mother to child. Compassion is seen to be the embodiment of the strong ties of love, kinship, and tenderness a mother feels for the baby she carries within her.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch,[3] for example, notes the connection between the words *rachamim* and *rechem*[4] and draws the conclusion that we