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Breaking the Illusion of Self-Sufficiency

Any thinking person today values gratitude. The benefits are well-documented: improved mood, better relationships, increased resilience.

Yet most modern gratitude focuses on feeling better, not recognizing our fundamental dependence. We thank the universe for abundance but rarely acknowledge the Source of that abundance. We express appreciation to the air, feel thankful "to the universe," or simply bask in

our good fortune—all while carefully avoiding any acknowledgment of an actual Source who might make claims on our lives.

Ancient Jewish wisdom avoids this superficial method by transforming every moment of benefit into conscious recognition of its Source. That's why Jews make blessings for everything—waking up, eating food, seeing lightning, even using the bathroom. These aren't quaint traditions but sophisticated technologies for maintaining proper perspective in a world that constantly tempts us toward spiritual amnesia.

To fully appreciate the power of a blessing, we must delve into this week's Torah portion, where we find the Torah's first and only explicitly mandated blessing: *Birkat HaMazon* - Grace After Meals.

Timing is Everything

After Moses describes the bountiful land of Israel, he entreats the people, "And you will eat and be sated, and you shall bless Hashem, your God, for the good land He has given you" (Devarim 8:10). One curious detail should jump out: why after the meal?

Intuition suggests we should bless before eating, and indeed, the Talmud derives that since God commanded a blessing after, we must certainly bless before (reciting the *HaMotzi* blessing). Yet why did the Torah specifically prescribe a blessing *after* the meal?

Moses answers this question in the very next lines, delivering a masterclass in human psychology:



"Beware that you do not forget Hashem, your God... lest you eat and be sated... and your heart grows haughty, and you forget the Lord, your God... and you will say to yourself, 'My strength and the might of my hand has accumulated this wealth for me'" (Devarim 8:11-17).

Moses' words reveal two psychological traps that pull us toward a false sense of self-sufficiency: satiation ("Lest you eat and be sated") and human effort ("My strength and the might of my hand"). Let's examine how these dynamics play out specifically with bread—the food that triggers our obligation for Grace After Meals.

Puffed Up With Pride

1. **Satiation** - Bread served as the nutritional cornerstone of ancient civilization—the primary staple that sustained entire populations. Unlike fruits or vegetables that provided temporary nourishment, bread delivered deep, lasting satiation that could carry someone through a full day of labor. Therefore, after eating a bread meal, a person would reach peak satiety—and peak spiritual vulnerability. A full stomach breeds dangerous contentment—the feeling that we need nothing and no one. This phenomenon represents the flip side of the saying "there are no atheists in a foxhole." When our stomachs are full, our bank accounts flush, or our goals achieved, we're most vulnerable to the intoxicating illusion of self-sufficiency.
2. **Human Effort** - Before supermarkets and industrial agriculture, bread required an elaborate chain of human labor: tilling,

planting, watering, weeding, harvesting, winnowing, milling, kneading, and baking. Each step demanded skill, timing, and backbreaking work. With so much human effort invested, we become prone to the illusion that our own hands created our sustenance.

This principle cuts across all achievement: the more work we invest, the more difficult it becomes to see God's hand in our lives. The entrepreneur who works 18-hour days struggles to acknowledge the market timing that made success possible. The student who studies relentlessly claims full credit for academic achievement, forgetting the functioning mind that made learning possible.

That's why the Torah mandates its most elaborate blessing specifically after eating bread—the food that combines maximum satisfaction with maximum human effort. Especially regarding times where we feel the most content and regarding achievements where we invest enormous energy, we must recognize that "not by bread alone does man live, but rather by all that arises from the mouth of God" (Devarim 8:3).

A Fence Against Arrogance

Rabeinu Bachya and the Ramban, two medieval Torah giants, draw a fascinating parallel in their commentary on Grace After Meals. They compare *Birkat Hamazon* to the commandment requiring a fence around your roof—if you have a house with a flat roof, you must install barriers around the edges to prevent fatal falls (Deut. 22:8).



Why did these great commentators choose this specific comparison? Of all the mitzvot they could have referenced, why connect Grace After Meals to rooftop safety?

Their parallel suggests a profound insight: just as physical barriers prevent fatal falls, gratitude practices prevent spiritual ones. The blessing serves as a safety mechanism, activated precisely when the danger peaks to keep us connected to God when we're most tempted to turn away.

A Life of Blessings

This surgical precision in addressing our psychological vulnerabilities extends beyond bread. If the food requiring maximum effort and providing maximum satisfaction demands a blessing, the Talmudic sages reasoned, then surely everything else does too. This logic transformed Jewish life into a cascade of conscious gratitude. Before drinking wine, we acknowledge the One who "creates the fruit of the vine." Upon seeing a rainbow, we praise the One who "remembers the covenant." Even after using the bathroom, we thank God for the intricate design that allows our bodies to function.

These aren't empty rituals but recognition technologies, constantly recalibrating our perspective toward reality's true Source.

Living the Practice

When my wife spends hours preparing our Shabbat meals, I witness this principle in action. Despite her enormous effort—planning menus, shopping for ingredients, cooking elaborate dishes—she concludes our feast by reciting Grace After Meals, redirecting credit to its ultimate Source:

"Blessed are You, Hashem, our God, King of the universe, Who, in His goodness, nourishes the entire world with grace, with kindness, and with compassion..."

The blessing doesn't diminish her contribution; it places her efforts within their proper cosmic context. She becomes a partner in divine creativity rather than its sole author.

Beyond the Table

But Grace After Meals isn't meant to stay at the dinner table. It offers a blueprint for approaching all of life's satisfactions. After closing a major deal, receiving recognition, or achieving a long-sought goal, pause. Acknowledge the countless seen and unseen factors that made this moment possible. Thank the people who contributed, but also recognize the deeper Source that orchestrated the entire symphony of circumstances.

In a culture obsessed with self-made success stories, this practice offers potent counter-programming. It doesn't diminish human agency but places it within its proper context: we are powerful, but we are not sovereign. We achieve, but we are not self-made. We create, but we are not the Creator.

This week, experiment with bringing conscious gratitude to your moments of satisfaction and success. Let each achievement become a doorway to deeper connection rather than deeper isolation. In doing so, you'll discover that true fulfillment comes not from taking credit, but from taking your place within the magnificent web of existence that makes every human accomplishment possible.

Shabbat Shalom!
Avraham



Loving Father

A famous Jewish phrase appears in this week's portion, "As a father chastises his son, so God chastises us" (Deut. 8:5). The idea of God as our "Father in Heaven" is one that we Jews shared with the world.

It was once pointed out to me that God is a Father in Heaven, not a grandfather in Heaven. Grandparents come bearing gifts and are happy to look after their grandchildren when the going is good. But as soon as the kids get tired or start misbehaving, they hand them back to the parents to sort out. Grandparents love their grandchildren, but do not take the same degree of responsibility as parents do.

And that's no small difference.

Taking responsibility for someone's success and happiness is consistent with the greatest levels of love. Marriage, in theory, is an example; we take responsibility for another person's happiness. If my wife is not happy, it's my problem just as much as it is hers. As a great rabbi once said when

visiting the doctor with his wife, "My wife's foot is hurting us." The greatest level of love requires us to commit to the other person such that his pain is our pain and his problems are our problems.

Parents most often feel this with children. Spouses sometimes feel this with each other. It is very difficult for unmarried people to feel this. But God? God feels this way unequivocally, unconditionally and without exception about each and every one of us - His children.

Judaism tells us that God is committed to not only the physical, but also the spiritual, wellbeing of his children. And if spiritual and physical priorities come into conflict, the spiritual will always take priority - because it is more valuable and more permanent.

God is not a grandfather. He doesn't walk away frustrated when we are misbehaving. He stands by us and tries to guide us to a better way of living. His guidance might sometimes require us to endure hardship, but it is always done out of love. Parents sometimes put their children through painful experiences - I had to pull out my daughter's wobbly tooth last week and she thought I was Tomas de Torquemada himself - but from my perspective it was done with love.

God too, always does what He does with love. It might not always be so easy to see, but our Father in Heaven guides our lives with a level of love and care that is far greater than even the greatest of parents.

The Mezuzah

Some years ago, when my wife and I were living in Israel, we bought our apartment from a fellow who (at the risk of severe understatement) was anti-religious. Given this background, a passing comment he made at our deal's closing seemed rather odd. He assured us that **all the Mezuzot in the house were completely kosher**. Noting my quizzical look, he then told my wife and I the following story:

Many years prior, his daughter had been born with a serious heart defect. After being told at the hospital that she didn't have long to live, he wandered the streets of Jerusalem in a daze. Finally, he came across an old Yemenite man and poured out his heart to him. The Yemenite advised him to buy Mezuzot and put them on his doorposts immediately.

Desperate for anything that could help his daughter, he ran to a religious neighborhood, asked where the nearest scribe lived, and bought several Mezuzot. After putting them up, he returned to the hospital where he was greeted with great news. Lo and behold, **a miracle had occurred**: His daughter's heart defect had disappeared!

When he finished telling us his story, the man then made a comment I will never forget. "You see" he said, "the Mezuzot are kosher. And if my daughter should ever **decide to become religious**, I can't stand in her way - because she belongs to God. But if my son ever tries to become religious ... I'll kill him!"

The Yemenite man's advice to put up Mezuzot, as strange as it may sound, is actually in line with Jewish tradition. In this week's Parsha, the verse dealing with the Mezuzah is **juxtaposed** with a verse promising long life to one's children (see Deut. 11:20-21). Both these verses are written on the parchment of the Mezuzah, and many commentators therefore explain that **Mezuzot help to protect children's health**.

But it is not children alone who benefit from the Mezuzah's presence. Written on the outside of each parchment is **the name of God, "Sha-dai."** Among other things, this divine appellation is an abbreviation for the words "*Shomer D'latei Yisrael*" - "**Guardian of the Gates of Israel.**" The Mezuzah, so to speak, guards the doors of a Jewish home.

Other sources see a different meaning to the Mezuzah. The Alshich notes that the Mezuzah is placed even upon the doors of rooms **inside the house**. Oftentimes, how a person appears in public is a far cry from how he acts in private. The Mezuzah therefore reminds us of the sanctity of the Jewish home.

Maimonides presents what is perhaps the most widely accepted understanding of Mezuzah. He explains that oftentimes people get so caught up in the hustle and bustle of making a living, that

they lose their "God consciousness." The Mezuzah, however, provides a wonderful solution to this problem.

The Mezuzah contains **a declaration of our Love of God** and our commitment to observe His mitzvot. As we pass through the door and **kiss the Mezuzah**, we focus on God's inspirational "instructions for living," posted on the wall.

Says Maimonides: The Mezuzah is a constant reminder "that nothing endures forever; nothing is eternal but knowledge of the Almighty. Upon reminding himself of this fact, a person will return to a proper consciousness and walk in a proper path."



Grateful Thinking

Dr. Jeffrey Froh, a psychologist at Hofstra University, is one of the leading gratitude researchers in the country. As part of his quest to increase levels of gratitude in students, he designed a curriculum that helps develop the thought processes people have in relation to gratitude. He delineates three "grateful thinking" strategies that can enhance the experience of gratitude.

The first is to consider the intent of the benefactor.

The second is to take into account the cost incurred by the benefactor.

The third is that the recipient contemplates the extent of the benefits that he or she accrued.

Middle school students in his research study that were taught this curriculum and practiced thinking about these three components, had increased gratitude, increased well-being, and exhibited more gratitude behaviors than students in a control group.

Over the course of his farewell address to the Children of Israel, Moses was intent on making them aware of two potential dangers lurking once they entered the land of Israel. The first was external. The Children of Israel should beware of the other cultures and nations around them. Those nations' debasement, primarily framed in terms of idol worship, could leak out and impact the Children of Israel to the point where they could potentially reject God.

The second was internal. Material success could lead to arrogance, and arrogance to the forgetting of God. "Your heart will become haughty and you will forget (*"veshachachta"*) the Lord, your God, who took you out of Egypt" (*Devarim* 8:14). The verses continue the list of things besides the Exodus the Children of Israel will forget: that God guided and protected them in the desert, and that he conducted miracles to provide them food and water. The remedy for external dangers is to reject the foreign cultures. Is the antidote to arrogance to discourage material wealth?

This solution hardly seems likely from the context. The promise of the land of Israel has always been framed within the context of material wealth – after all, it is the land that flows with milk and honey. What then is the corrective course of action to prevent the arrogance that seems to flow from economic success?

Perhaps the answer is embedded in a reinterpretation of the verse above. The Hebrew letter “vov” of “*veshachachta*” can mean either **and** or **because**. Instead of reading it that “Your heart will become haughty **and** you will forget the Lord,” we can read it, “Your heart will become haughty **because** you will forget the Lord.”

Forgetting and ingratitude serve as the intervening variables that stand in between material success and arrogance. Success is not the cause of arrogance and lack of success is not the salve. Rather, arrogance is rooted in forgetting, and forgetting in ingratitude.

Ibn Ezra colors in the forgotten emotional experience behind these historical events. They will forget how lowly of spirit they were when they were slaves, before God saved them. They will forget the pain and suffering they experienced in the desert, before God provided the miracles.

Rabbi Mordechai Gifter (Pirkei Emunah, p. 74) expands on Ibn Ezra’s comments and finds an essential lesson to help deepen our experience of gratitude: When God or another person does something that benefits us, it is insufficient to just say thank you. True gratitude requires “grateful thinking” as well. We must contemplate the essence of the good that was bestowed upon us.

Consequently, we are required to reflect on the situation that we were in before we received the benefit. This is the only way to fully appreciate the depths of the gratitude owed. Moshe was cautioning the Children of Israel not to forget the good God has and will perform, which requires them to meditate on the pain and suffering that they encountered before being saved.

To protect against the arrogance that material success can bring, we need to be grateful. Yet, we cannot fulfill our obligation of gratitude with a quick and trite thank you. If we want to truly experience gratitude we need to step back and analyze using “grateful thinking” strategies. To fully appreciate what we have, we must vividly recall the lack we experienced before we received that benefit. By working on this cognitive exercise, we can deepen our thankfulness to God for all He provides and enhance our gratefulness to those around us who enrich our lives.

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