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Thanks, But No Thanks

In this week's Torah portion we meet Laban, the coldhearted swindler who repeatedly deceives Jacob. He tricks Jacob into marrying Leah instead of Rachel and, as Rashi explains (*Bereishis* 31:7), he then tries to cheat Jacob by changing the terms of their agreement more than 100 times.

And then the despicable Laban says something so completely out of character, you can't help but stop in your tracks and take notice.

Jacob has completed the 14 years of work that he committed to do for Laban in exchange for

marrying his daughters Rachel and Leah, and now he wants to return to Israel. Laban is not happy to see Jacob go, however: "But Laban said to him, 'If I have found favor in your eyes! I have learned by divination that Hashem has blessed me on account of you'" (ibid 30:27).

Laban is telling Jacob, "I figured out the secret to my wealth – God blessed me because of you. Now, of course I don't want you to work for nothing, so let's cut a deal and figure out a way for you to continue working for me." What is so striking is that Laban says that God, the transcendental, eternal Source of existence, is the One Who blessed him on account of Jacob. Does this appreciation of God sound like the Laban we know? Why has he suddenly become so pious?

We understand that Laban wants to manipulate Jacob to continue working for him, but that does not explain his admission that God is behind his success. Recognizing God as the Source of all your blessings is no easy task! That is why the Hebrew for thanks, *todah*, comes from root "to admit" – because saying thank you means we are admitting we have a debt of gratitude that must be repaid. None of us likes to owe anything to others. We have a tendency to minimize our debt of gratitude and thereby lessen the extent to which we are beholden to others and Hashem.

If we Jews, who say *Shema Yisrael* and *Modim Anachnu Lach* every day, have a tough time admitting that the Almighty has blessed us, how can a self-absorbed swindler like Laban explicitly recognize that God is the Source of all his blessings and wealth?

It's All a Sham

One person understood Laban's true intentions, and that was Jacob. Look at Jacob's response to Laban's acknowledgement of God:

But he [Jacob] said to him, "You know how I served you and what your livestock were with me. For the little that you had before I came has expanded substantially as Hashem has blessed you with my coming; and now, when will I also do something for my own house?" (ibid 30:29-30)

Jacob is confronting Laban and telling him, "I see right through your verbiage and lies. Yes, God blessed you because of me. That's true, Laban. But God isn't the only One you need to thank. You cannot ignore the fact that I worked hard for your sheep. I was the one who took care of your livestock and increased the size of your flock. You owe me as well. And if you cannot recognize your debt of gratitude to me, then don't talk to me about how much the Almighty did for you."

Jacob has Laban's number. He understands that *hakarat hatov*, gratitude, begins with appreciating the debt you have toward humans. If you cannot admit to that more concrete debt of gratitude, then you cannot truly recognize your more ephemeral debt of gratitude to God. It's all a sham.

Pharaoh vs. Moses

Pharaoh exhibited a profound lack of gratitude, as the Torah says, "A new king arose over Egypt who did not know of Yosef" (*Shemos* 1:8). Pharaoh was an ingrate of the highest order, because he did not recognize all that Yosef had

done to save Egyptian society from starvation. This lack of gratitude made it possible for him to oppress the Jewish people, and inevitably led him to deny God. As the Midrash says, "Today Pharaoh does not know of Yosef; tomorrow he says, 'I do not know Hashem.'" (*Tanchuma, Shemos* 5)

It is much easier to be real with another human being than it is to be real with God, because the Almighty cannot be perceived on a sensory level. Therefore, if you want to genuinely appreciate all the Almighty does for you, you first have to appreciate everything your parents have done for you. They are more concrete, and their giving is more real and far more tangible. First recognize your debt of gratitude to them, and then you will be able to appreciate what the Almighty has done for you and continues to do for you. The opposite is also true. If you cannot admit that you were helped by a human being, in the end you will certainly have a tough time admitting that you were helped by God.

Moses's behavior was the opposite of Pharaoh's; he excelled in his ability to be grateful. Moses not only appreciated the kindness he received from others, he was also careful to show his gratitude even to inanimate objects. As the Midrash says in explaining why Aaron, and not Moses, was the one who brought the plagues of blood and frogs, "Since the Nile protected Moses when he was cast into it, it therefore was not hit by him, neither with blood nor with frogs, but was hit by Aaron" (Rashi on *Shemos* 7:19, based on *Tanchuma, Va'eira* 14).

Pay Your Debts

Laban is willing to recognize God's existence and even admit that the Almighty Himself is involved in the affairs of man and has personally blessed him, as long as he does not have to admit that he owes Jacob anything. That is why Laban suddenly uses the word God, which he never mentions again in the Torah.

Unless we are willing to recognize our debt of gratitude to our fellow man – whether it is to our parents, our friends, our teachers, or to anyone else who tries to help us – and to appreciate that the effort alone creates a debt of gratitude, then we do not recognize the good done to us. As a result, we will not be able to appreciate what the Almighty has given us, either. In the end, we may even say, “I do not know God. I did all this myself. It was my hard work, my intelligence, my commitment, that brought this about. I don't owe God anything.”

We bristle against the idea that we are indebted to others. We do not like to recognize the good people do for us, for we think that being beholden to them impinges on our independence. But we are deceiving ourselves, just as Laban did. Real independence means having the inner strength and humility to appreciate the gifts we have received from the people in our lives. Doing so is the only way to truly appreciate the gifts we have received from the Almighty as well.



Jacob's Ladder

Innovation is a hallmark of the human spirit. Innovators, the pioneers of new ideas, challenge the status quo and aim to improve upon it.

Each generation distinguishes itself through its introduction of new and improved innovations.

How many of us still use typewriters or record players? What once were amazing innovations fall out of fashion, eventually becoming obsolete. Such are the consequences of innovation. Yet even in today's technological world, some things possess timeless staying power. Take, for example, the ladder—the subject of Jacob's dream in this week's Torah portion.

The Hebrew word for “ladder” is *sulam*. A permutation of the Hebrew letters of *sulam* uncovers a deep insight that explains the ladder's lasting significance. By rearranging the letters of *sulam*—*samech*, *lamed*, *mem*—we reveal another word, *semel*, which means “symbol.” What is the symbolism of the ladder? This simplistic device for climbing up or down has not undergone a conceptual alteration since its inception.

Metaphorically, the Torah expands the simple function of the ladder to include imagery that

bridges the gap between Heaven and Earth. Imagery assists the mind in perceiving that which the eye cannot see. It is a vehicle for conceptualizing the space in which the physical and spiritual realms interface. Through visual imagery, we can grasp the concept of a transition.

Life presents us with various transitions that challenge the status quo of our comfort levels. We may find ourselves at a crossroads, recognizing the need for change, but unsure of which road to take. We may feel unprepared and unequipped to navigate the unfamiliar journeys we face ahead. How do we best traverse the liminal space between where we are and where we would like to be? What are the best means to help us reach our desired goals and destinations? How do we combat the feelings of uncertainty and vulnerability that can confront us along the way, eclipsing the guiding light of faith?

When navigating an unknown terrain or transition, there are two choices: you can cross over it, by bridging the gap from point A to point B, or you can transcend it. Often, the image of a bridge is used to represent passing from one stage in life to the next. Yet, while we are changing our place, we are not necessarily being changed or changing ourselves. While remaining at the same altitude, we cannot transcend our present state of being or perspective.

In contrast, while ascending or descending a ladder rung by rung, we change our altitude incrementally. We are either moving up or down, never remaining static. Our vantage point either broadens as we ascend or constricts as we descend.

Rashi explains that the ascending angels represent those spiritual forces that accompany Jacob and the Jewish People while in our home-land—Eretz Yisrael. They must return heavenward when Jacob leaves the Holy Land, but they are replaced by other angelic forces better suited to safeguard the Jewish nation when dwelling outside of the land. *Rashi's* explanation foretells our eventual merit to settle in Eretz Yisrael, the Land of Israel.

Jacob's ladder also widens our perspectives on the power of prayer as a vehicle for navigating the transition between Heaven and Earth. Meaningful prayer creates a spiritual imprint. Such prayer leaves its impression upon the fabrics of both time and spiritual eternity. Our prayers are activated only to the degree that we are mindful and sincere. In Jacob's dream, they are depicted as angelic forms rising. Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi explains that our prayers create accompanying angels, or energies, of varying strengths. The sincerity and sheer intent of each heart propels it to ascend the rungs of physicality. A prayer can pierce through the finite as it yearns and strives to reach the infinite realms.

In a similar vein, Rabbi Eliezer ben Jacob said, "He who does one mitzvah gains himself one advocate, while he who commits one transgression acquires for himself one accuser." This is understood as referring to creating spiritual advocates and accusers.

Technology does not run parallel to advancements in human behavior. Improvements in technology increase the speed, but not the quality, of human interactions. To our chagrin, technology fails to deliver solutions to eradicate emotional pain,

abuse, hatred, or jealousy. Human development is eclipsed by technological development.

As human beings, we are a fusion of physical and spiritual characteristics. So much has been explored and documented pertaining to the physical components of our lives. The cognitive and spiritual worlds still have vast territories to be explored. The area of thought, for example, has great impact on the spiritual quality of life. Each of our thoughts produces an ongoing chain of positive and negative impressions. How we regard the so-called small details of daily life greatly impacts our broader life views.

Fifteen hundred years ago, Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani recognized that “we don’t see things as they are; we see them as we are.” How we interpret life’s details affects our response to them. It’s human nature to form reactions as a result of how we interpret what has been revealed to us. Yet so much significance on many levels remains unrevealed. Do we truly know why people act the way they do?

If we could accurately see and understand all of the details that form the entirety of an individual’s background, we might have a better platform from which to evaluate their behavior. With this in mind, how accurate and real are our perceptions of and responses to the people in our lives? We can only see what’s visible on the surface, and then it is only through the lens of our own biased perspectives. Although it’s human nature to give in to our instincts, it’s human greatness to act above our instincts.

The image of Jacob’s ladder holds the potential to be utilized as a device to chart and measure the

progress and course of spiritual growth and development. Each rung either ascending or descending is a visual image that indicates where one’s spiritual altitude is at any given moment. As a mental cue, Jacob’s ladder can provide powerful assistance in developing cognitive and spiritual muscle. As physical resistance stimulates the body to build muscle, spiritual resistance promotes the development of inner strength and resilience. Raising the spiritual bar, symbolized by the rungs of Jacob’s ladder, can give one a visual image of where they are holding in terms of thoughts and reactions toward life’s daily challenges and provocations.

Does my choice of words in any given situation denigrate or elevate my place on the ladder? Am I ascending or descending through the way I have expressed myself to others? How do the relationships in my life affect the altitude of my attitude? Which way am I moving, up or down? Do my thoughts raise my altitude, thereby improving my attitude, or lower and diminish it?

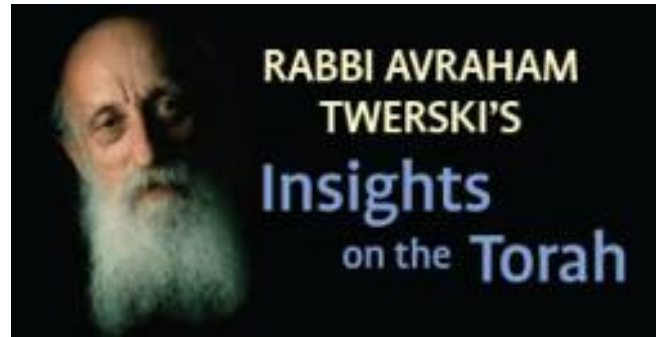
Jacob’s ladder holds the potential to be updated into a spiritual GPS, actually calibrating the direction of our thoughts and actions. It can serve to chart our path, keep us on course, and help us reach our ultimate destination. It’s the oldest yet the newest app that’s out there. Ascending Jacob’s ladder can represent a lifetime of spiritual journeying.

In conclusion, Jacob’s dream of a ladder, firmly anchored on Earth and ascending to the Heavens, poses much upon which to contemplate. From the macro to the micro level, this ancient vision is a portal from the past to the present, and from the

present to the future. Jacob's ladder remains an enduring symbol of timeless relevance.

Making It Relevant

1. Visualize yourself climbing up or down a ladder. The ladder charts your personal growth. What rung do you see yourself on? Are you ascending or descending from the position you were on previously? Recognize that you are not static. You may be on a low rung, but ascending, or on a high rung, but descending. Would you rather be descending from a high rung or ascending from a low rung? Also, remember that if you slip down a rung, you can climb back up—or even go higher.
2. Throughout each day, assess where you are on your personal ladder in regard to thinking positively rather than negatively.
3. Be mindful of your responses to provocations or challenges. Visualize your reactions and outward behaviors as occupying a rung on the ladder. In what direction are you moving? How can you alter your direction if you are moving down?



When Years Seem like a Few Days

He (Jacob) said, “Look, the day is still long; it is not yet time to bring the livestock in; water the flock and go on grazing” (Genesis, 29:7).

Jacob was rather harsh in reprimanding the shepherds. Wasn't it obvious that the stone covering the well was so massive that it required many men to move it? The Rabbi of Gur (Imrei Emes) said that Jacob was aware of this, but that he rebuked them for not trying to move it. But is it not possible that they had in fact tried but could not move it? Yes, but just because they failed once, why were they not trying again? But how did Jacob know that they had not tried repeatedly? Was his rebuke justified?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch sheds light on this episode by asking, why was it necessary to cover the well with so massive a stone? Could they not have covered it with something not quite as heavy? He answers that the shepherds were suspicious of one another, and feared that a lighter cover would enable one of them to uncover the well on his own and take an unfair share of the water for his flock. In order to prevent this, they

made it impossible to have access to the water unless they were all present.

Jacob understood this, and reasoned that people who had no trust in one another were likely to be indolent and not exert themselves. Traits are infectious. Trust and diligence are likely to go hand in hand, as are distrust and sloth. Jacob knew that they had not even tried to uncover the well.

Even in a competitive world, we should have faith that what God decreed for us to have cannot be taken from us. Begrudging other people's success because we may think that it comes at our expense is a contemptible character trait, and unless we rid ourselves of this trait, it may affect other aspects of our character.

Character traits are not likely to exist in isolation. True faith in God and to *fargin* others (be happy for someone else's good fortune) tend to go together.

So Jacob worked seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him a few days because of his love for her (29:20)

Some of the commentaries note that this appears to be the reverse of what we usually experience. Being separated from someone one loves makes each day of separation feel like an eternity. How could it be that Jacob's love for Rachel made seven years seem like but a few days?

I am indebted to one of my patients for an insight into this verse. This young man was recovering from an addiction to alcohol. He had become dependent on alcohol, and the thought that he

could never drink again was intolerable. When he joined the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous, he was told not to focus on the rest of his life, but to deal with just this day. "It is not impossible for you to abstain from drinking just today, is it? Then focus only on what you must do today. There is nothing you can do today about tomorrow's sobriety, so there is no point in contemplating it."

I have found this principle in the works of *mussar*. The *yetzer hara* (evil inclination) says, "What point is there in trying to observe all the Torah prohibitions? There is no way you can do so for the rest of your life. You are certain to violate Torah in quest of your desires. Why fight a losing battle? Why struggle and deny yourself so many pleasures when you are doomed to fail at it? You might as well just give in now." The response to the *yetzer hara* should be, "I do not have to deal with the rest of my life today. I know that today I can withstand temptation, and that is all I am concerned with. When tomorrow comes, I'll deal with that challenge then."

The literal translation of the verse above is not "they seemed to him a *few* days." The Hebrew word *achadim* means "single days." The delay of seven years would have been very difficult to manage. Jacob, therefore, did not think of seven years, but took each day as it came. He could tolerate the deprivation *today*, and that was all that was necessary.

This is an important lesson for us. It is commonplace for people to make "New Year's resolutions," and these are soon broken. The reason for this is that a year is too great a task to

undertake. One should resolve, “I will not lose my temper *today*,” or “I will not smoke *today*” or “I will adhere to my diet *today*.” Reducing challenges to smaller segments of time makes them much more manageable.



Why Are We Called Jews?

What does it mean to be a Jew? Throughout my life, I encountered the word "Jew" used as a casual slight, albeit jokingly, but never as a compliment. On a personal level, my Jewishness was a fact but not a source of pride. My relationship with Judaism wasn't much better. I didn't connect to the seemingly arbitrary and random religious practices and I loathed the long and boring prayer services. Sitting in Synagogue, I remember calculating when to pretend to need the bathroom so as to break up the monotony in optimal intervals.

The Ferrari in the Garage

In order to appreciate anything, you have to understand its purpose and how it works. If you own a Ferrari but don't know how to operate it, you'll tear out the seats and use them as lawn chairs.

This disconnect between possession and understanding perfectly described my own Jewish journey. In my case, after my Bar Mitzvah, I just left the Ferrari in the garage and went off to what I thought were bigger and better things.

If only I'd learned the most essential principle of Judaism; a principle so fundamental that we can find it in the etymology of the words Jew, Jewish, and Judaism. Why are we called Jews? Our exploration begins in this week's Torah portion.

The Etymology of Gratitude

After Jacob receives Esau's blessings from his father Isaac, he flees to Padan Aram to escape his brother's wrath. There, he works seven years for his deceptive, double-crossing uncle, Lavan, in order to win Lavan's daughter Rachel's hand in marriage.

On the night of their wedding, Lavan switches the sisters, tricking Jacob into marrying his older daughter, Leah. A week later, Lavan gives Rachel to Jacob as a second wife in exchange for 7 more years of work. Soon after, the two sisters give their maidservants, Bilhah and Zilpah, as wives to help build the Jewish nation. Their selfless act brings the number of Jacob's wives to four.

The four matriarchs knew prophetically that Jacob would father 12 sons, who would become the 12 tribes of the Jewish nation. Leah, who we can assume was a proficient math student, understood that with four mothers, a natural division would allocate three sons to each mother ($12 / 4 = 3$). But, lo and behold, Hashem blessed her beyond her allotted portion.

Upon giving birth to her fourth son, Leah exclaimed, “This time let me gratefully praise (אודה) Hashem!”; therefore she called his name Yehuda (יהודה)” (Genesis, 29:35). Rashi explains Leah's thought process: “Because [God] gave me more than my portion, now it is incumbent upon me to give thanks (להודות).”

We learn from these verses that name Yehuda means "I will give thanks." Yehuda, the tribe of leadership of the Jewish nation, became the namesake for all the Jewish people – the *Yehudim*. *Yehudim* adapted over time to the words Jew and Jewish. Putting the pieces together, Gratitude → Yehuda → *Yehudim* → Jews. Our name describes our essence; we are the people who give thanks; the grateful nation; the nation who gives thanks for being given more than our fair share. Wow!

Let's go a step further. If a Jew is one who gives thanks, then Judaism is the religion of giving thanks. R. Dessler, one of the great Mussar teachers of the last century, in his Essay on Lovingkindness, summarizes:

"The true service of God is built on a foundation of gratitude. It is stated with the utmost clarity in all the books of Tanach (Torah, Prophets, Writings) that we have a duty to be thankful to Hashem for all the good He bestows on us. Gratitude is the motivation of our observance of all the mitzvos and statutes of the Torah."¹

The equation is as follows: God gives to us (Life, Torah, abundance, meaning, opportunity, etc.), we feel appreciation, we look for outlets to reciprocate (i.e. the mitzvos) and carry them out

with joy, and we end up in a loving relationship with God. That's Judaism in a nutshell!²

An Epiphany of Appreciation

I remember the moment where this truth became clear to me. After my Birthright trip in Israel, I visited my good friend from college, now studying at Aish HaTorah - a yeshiva in Jerusalem. Sitting together at the Western Wall, he challenged me to think about my relationship to my Creator. Prior to this, I had built a relationship to God for approximately two years through journaling, meditating, and praying, but not through any religious medium.

Pondering his question, I entered a deep state of contemplation. My face pressed against the ancient stones, and the murmur of prayers filled the air like a gentle tide. Minutes passed. Then all of a sudden, it hit me: "Here was all this blessing – family, friends, food, shelter, travel, experiences, meaning... life itself! And what did I do to deserve any of it? Nothing!"

From the depths of my heart, I felt a need to say "Thank You" to God for all I'd been given. But how? I opened my eyes and looked around at the Jews nearby. I saw them shuckling back and forth in devotion, chanting words out of their books, and pouring over ancient texts. I thought to myself: If God made me Jewish, then maybe the best way I could show Him my appreciation is through Judaism!

That realization changed everything. The next day, I bought a copy of the Torah, a kippah (which I only wore on Shabbat at first) and began my Jewish journey.

Making it Practical - A Weekly Thanksgiving

I'd like to end by sharing a very practical and enjoyable way to bring more gratitude into your life. During the Covid lockdown, every Friday night during the Shabbay evening meal, my mom and I started a practice of sharing what we were grateful for from that week; a practice that I carry on with my wife to this day.

I encourage you to do the same. Pause from your eating, alone, or with loved ones and reflect on what you are grateful for. You can aim to include three things; something small, something present, and something big. This simple practice embodies what it truly means to be a Jew - to recognize and give thanks for the blessings in our lives.

Through consistent practice of gratitude, we will be inspired to carry out our Divine mission of bringing God's love and goodness down into our world through His Torah and commandments.

Shabbat Shalom!

to give back. When a person feels like an empty vessel, he needs constant refilling. But when a person, through gratitude, realizes that he has been given everything - more than enough - he becomes like a spring, bursting forth with abundance, overflowing his bounty onto all of creation and, through divine service, give back to God, who gave him all that he has.

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1. This basic principle is hinted at in the first of the Ten Commandments revealed by God in that blinding revelation to all our people at Mount Sinai: *'I am Hashem your God, Who took you out of the land of Egypt, the house of slavery.'* It is clear that the mention of the release from Egypt, reinforced by the reference to the 'house of slavery,' is intended to arouse in us feelings of gratitude as a prelude to our acceptance of God's Torah.' [Unlike service of God that derives from fear], service which partakes of wholeness and perfection can only be that which comes from unselfish feelings of gratitude.
2. Footnote: There's one more beautiful idea I'd like to add: In the famous teaching from Pirkei Avos - "Ethics of our Fathers" - Mishna 4:1 - one of our great sages, Ben Zoma, asks "Who is rich?" Now, your first inclination might be to think of the Jeff Bezoses of the world, but come on... you know it can't be that easy! Ben Zoma, the author of the Mishna, wisely informs us that the correct answer is "He who is happy with his lot." If we cannot appreciate what we have, we don't really have it. So what does wealth have to do with what we said earlier - that gratitude is the entryway towards Torah and a relationship with God? I think the answer is simple: when we feel we have more than our fair share - when we feel wealthy - we naturally want