



# The Gift of Gratitude

## GIVING THANKS TO GOD



# THE GIFT OF GRATITUDE

## Praise the Lord for Every Breath

*Let everything that has  
breath praise the LORD.  
Praise the LORD.*

— PSALM 150:6

Shortly, millions of Americans will celebrate Thanksgiving — a time to focus on our blessings and express our gratitude for all the good things in our lives. Thankfully, there are many things to be grateful for in life. But here's one that you may have missed: The blessing of yet another breath.

Breathing is something almost everyone takes for granted. It's the first thing we do when we are born and the last thing we do when we die. We do it even when we are sleeping or when we aren't thinking about it. It's an automatic blessing that we receive all the time. So it's no wonder that people take little notice of it and underestimate the gift that it really is.

The ability to breathe is our chance at another day. It is literally the gift of life. When God brought Adam to life, He breathed into his nostrils (Genesis 2:7). Breathing is life. However, the Jewish sages point out that breathing is connected not only to the physical act of living, but also to our spiritual vitality. In Hebrew, the word for "breath," *neshima*, is almost the same as the word for "soul," *neshama*. This is because when we breathe, we connect with our soul.

Try it. Breathe deeply and slowly. You will immediately notice what doctors and mental health professionals have been telling us for years. Breathing deeply calms us and quiets the mind while putting us in touch with our innermost thoughts and feelings. We are better focused and more centered when we take the time to breathe deeply. We literally breathe in God's life force, and the more we breathe in, the better our living will be.

Psalms 150, the very last psalm, is all about praising God and being thankful. The last line reads, "*Let everything that has breath praise the LORD.*" However, the sages teach that the verse can also be read "Praise the *LORD* for every breath." King David's parting message to us is to be grateful for everything that we have, starting with the ability to take our next breath.

Although the Book of Psalms is mostly about praising God for our blessings, the truth is that most people turn to it during times of trouble. However, the last verse reminds us that no matter how difficult our circumstances, we can always be grateful for our ability to breathe and the fact that we are alive. As long as we are living we can hope, fix, change, and grow.

**When we are thankful for our breath, we can be grateful for everything.  
Praise the Lord!**



# THE GIFT OF GRATITUDE

## The Original Thanksgiving

*“The meat of their fellowship offering of thanksgiving must be eaten on the day it is offered; they must leave none of it till morning.”*

— LEVITICUS 7:15

According to Jewish tradition, when the Holy Temple is rebuilt, none of the sacrifices outlined in Leviticus will be offered anymore – except for one: the thanksgiving offering. The Jewish sages continue to explain that none of the prayers we say now will be said in the future either – except for one: the thanksgiving prayer.

The point that the sages are making is that in messianic times, humankind will reach a higher state of being and will no longer need to atone for sins or lack anything they need. Greed, war, hunger, and transgressions will have long gone. But the act of thanking God is timeless!

There is something else unique about the thanksgiving offering. It had to be accompanied by 40 meal offerings, all of which had to be consumed by sunset on that day. In fact, it was impossible for those bringing the thanksgiving offering to finish all the food by themselves in the required time. Why did God make it this way?

The sages explain that the impossible requirements were quite intentional. God wanted the worshipper to be unable to complete the task on his own so that he would invite others to join him. Those bringing the offering would be forced to share their meal with others, who inevitably would ask why. This would give worshippers the opportunity to share their story and gratitude with others. And that's precisely the point of the offering: To express genuine, heartfelt gratitude to God. In this way, the offering would be complete.

The importance of thanking God for our blessings, especially in the presence of others, is something that will certainly never change. For good reason, too – not only is it pleasing to God, but it also does wonders for us. Gratitude has the power to completely change our outlook on life – from one of pessimism to optimism, from sadness to joy.

**Saying “thank you” to God isn’t just a gift we give to Him; it’s the greatest gift we can give to ourselves!**



# THE GIFT OF GRATITUDE

## A Theology of Thanks

*“Even while they were  
in their kingdom,  
enjoying your great  
goodness to them in the  
spacious and fertile land  
you gave them, they did  
not serve you or turn  
from their evil ways.”*

— NEHEMIAH 9:35

In *Endymion*, the last novel that British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli published, the character Mr. St. Barbe, at one point, exclaimed, “I declare when I was eating that truffle, I felt a glow about my heart that, if it were not indigestion, I think must have been gratitude.”

It is true that, in Disraeli’s depiction, St. Barbe is a conceited pessimist, so we shouldn’t be surprised at such an obnoxious observation. At the same time, however, St. Barbe’s attitude highlights for us a paradox of the human condition that we often encounter.

Purely in terms of civility and common decency, we would expect that a person’s gratitude should correspond, at least roughly, to the magnitude of the kindness done for him. When lent a pencil, a polite “thank you” suffices. When a parent nurses a sick child back to health, however, a great deal more thankfulness is in order.

And yet when it comes to gratitude toward, or even acknowledgement of God, our Creator, it is often when we are most successful, most blessed by peace and prosperity, that we are most likely to forget the Source of all kindness. It is then that gratitude often is the furthest thing from our minds.

The *Torah* constantly stresses the danger of this theological pitfall. For instance, over the recounting of Jewish history in Nehemiah, we are told of the many times the Israelites tested God’s love for them, and the countless instances of His eternal kindness towards them even so. The climax of this narrative cycle comes in the description, in verse 35, of the nation’s lack of gratitude to God even when they were secure and prosperous in their rule over Israel. Even then, the Jewish people lamented that they did not serve God as best we could.

Here, we see a nation blessed with God’s kindness failing to give thanks where thanks are due. And yet, God, in His infinite mercy, constantly waits for His people to repent – in Hebrew, to do *teshuvah*.

**It is precisely when we experience good fortune that we must take the responsibility and privilege of acknowledging God’s wondrous deeds on our behalf. Once we do, we will find that our relationship with Him has deepened in profound and surprising ways.**



# THE GIFT OF GRATITUDE

## The Blessing of Enough

*Now a wind went out  
from the LORD and  
drove quail in from the  
sea. It scattered them up  
to two cubits deep all  
around the camp, as far  
as a day's walk  
in any direction.*

— NUMBERS 11:31

We live in a society of wanting. There is always something else to want, to have, to own. There is always something more to be had, leaving us with the feeling that there is no such thing as enough, let alone the possibility of having too much. Whatever it is that we have, we believe that there can always be more.

This is a huge mistake in thinking. We are all familiar with the challenges of having too little, but what most of us fail to recognize, is that there is also a danger in having too much.

Just as plants need the right amount of water – not less and also not more – in order to thrive and grow, so, too, do we human beings, flowers in the garden of God, need just the right amount of resources in order to grow. Less will make it more difficult to thrive, and so will having more.

God is our gardener, and He knows exactly how much we need.

This point is driven home in the story we read about in Numbers chapter 11 about how the children of Israel complained that they did not have enough. God doesn't punish them for complaining by taking away the blessings that they already had; rather He gave them more than they need. He gave them too much!

In our verse today, we read, "*Now a wind went out from the LORD and drove quail in from the sea. It scattered them up to two cubits deep all around the camp, as far as a day's walk in any direction.*" There was so much food to eat that the people became sick from it. The point was made – it is possible to have too much.

So let us take what we have with gratitude and thanksgiving, knowing from the bottom of our hearts that we have what we need. Sometimes less is really more, and what we lack, our greatest blessing.





# THE GIFT OF GRATITUDE

## The Right of Delight

*Then all the people  
went away to eat and  
drink, to send portions  
of food and to celebrate  
with great joy, because  
they now understood  
the words that had been  
made known to them.*

— NEHEMIAH 8:12

Rebecca just was promoted at work. As soon as she leaves the office with her new paycheck, her first stop is the car dealership down the block. She drives away with a brand new car.

Tom just celebrated a milestone birthday. In honor of the occasion, he drives over to the jewelry store and buys himself a snazzy, new watch.

These stories sound familiar to most of us, and chances are that most of us either have done something like this, or know others who have. And, in fact, there's nothing wrong with these actions. People certainly are entitled to mark happy occasions with personal celebrations. Turning to the Bible, however, we see there is an additional component to celebration that we might have overlooked.

In the wake of Ezra the Scribe's success in reviewing the Bible's teachings with the large crowds that had gathered, the people declared a holiday marking their spiritual achievements. Strikingly, the resulting festivities were marked by people *sending* to those less fortunate "*portions of food*" (in Hebrew, *manot*) as gifts.

This recalls a similar mass act of giving recorded in the Book of Esther, where we are told that in commemoration of God's salvation of the Jewish people from the hands of the evil Haman, the Jews of Persia sent "*presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor*" (Esther 9:22).

In both these examples, we find a celebration of thanksgiving marked not just by self-indulgence, but also by a desire to ensure that one's neighbors and friends – as well as those in need – are included in the joyous occasion. Indeed, what more appropriate reaction to God's abundant kindnesses could there be than to share the bounty of His goodness with others who have less than we do?

Over the course of our lives, we hopefully will have the chance to experience success or joy, even if only small or fleeting. When we do, let us remember these biblical examples and share our happiness with others. In turn – and perhaps more importantly – let us commit to rejoicing with our coworkers, spouses, children, next-door-neighbors when *they* succeed.

**As we learn from the Books of Nehemiah and Esther, when we spread happiness and good tidings with others, we are engaged in the truest form of gratitude to and worship of our God.**



# THE GIFT OF GRATITUDE

## Cultivating a Grateful Heart

*Come, let us sing for joy  
to the LORD;  
let us shout aloud to  
the Rock of our  
salvation.  
Let us come before him  
with thanksgiving  
and extol him with  
music and song.*

— PSALM 95:1–2

How do you tell God thank you? Do you do so privately during your quiet time with Him? Or maybe you write it down in your journal? Maybe it's just a fleeting thought, a whispered thanks, as you arrive safely home from a long journey, or as you witness the beauty of the setting sun.

The writer of Psalm 95 encourages us to tell God thanks in quite a different way. He invites us to “sing for joy,” to “shout aloud,” to come before God with thanksgiving on our lips and to worship him with music and song. According to the psalm writer, our hearts should be so brimming with gratitude to God for all that He has done that we can't help but bubble over with joy and shout out our thanks.

Is that how we tell God thanks?

English writer and author Gladys Bronwyn Stern once wrote that silent gratitude is of use to no one. Inspirational writer William Arthur Ward put it this way, “Feeling gratitude and not expressing it is like wrapping a present and not giving it.”

Expressing our thankfulness is meant to be shared with others, aloud. We need to tell the object of our gratitude what we're feeling, not just think about it. Not only is the recipient of gratitude blessed when we say “thank you,” but we also are lifted up when we see the effects our words have on others and when we focus on the good things in our lives.

When we consider giving thanks as a gift to be given, as words to be shouted, as a song to sing in joy, it helps us to cultivate that attitude in our hearts. It is more than just an automatic response; giving thanks becomes a lifestyle that can inspire and encourage others.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a great Jewish theologian, once said that gratitude is the only response that can sustain us through life's difficulties. He summed up the necessity for giving thanks to God in this way: “It is gratefulness which makes the soul great.”

So as we gather around the Thanksgiving table this year with our family and friends, let's shout out our gratitude for the many blessings God has bestowed upon us.

**Let's sing with joy for all He has done to protect us and secure us for yet one more year.**



Photo: World ORT 2019

# THE GIFT OF GRATITUDE

## The Recipe to a Better Life

*“If you bring a grain offering baked in an oven, it is to consist of the finest flour . . . If your grain offering is prepared on a griddle, it is to be made of the finest flour mixed with oil, and without yeast . . . If your grain offering is cooked in a pan, it is to be made of the finest flour and some olive oil.”*

— LEVITICUS 2:4-7

It has been said that the quality of our gratitude determines the quality of our lives. In other words, the more we express thankfulness, the happier we are and the more we are blessed.

If that's the case and gratitude is such an important ingredient in our lives, why do so many people leave it out? It's partially due to the fast pace of our lives today, coupled with all the distractions of our technology. The truth is if we want to have quality gratitude, we have to take the time to cultivate it. In today's verses, we find a recipe for gratitude – one that helps us see the manifold blessings in our lives, so that, in turn, we may lead more blessed lives.

In describing the meal offering, which is a voluntary sacrifice, the *Torah* describes it prepared three different ways: baked in an oven, prepared on a griddle, and cooked in a pan. The Jewish sages explain that each corresponds to three different types of gratitude.

The offering baked in the oven represents our “daily bread” – the basic necessities for living. The offering prepared on a griddle is associated with a sweet cake and represents the luxuries that sweeten our lives. Finally, the offering made in a pan represents dishes cooked for special occasions — the momentous, joyful occasions in our lives that go beyond our daily needs and gifts. In mentioning these three types of offerings, Scripture is teaching us that we have to cultivate gratitude in all these areas.

If we have food and water, our basic daily needs have already been met by our generous God. Let us say, “Thanks!”

I recently read these statistics: “If you have food in the refrigerator, clothes on your back, a roof overhead and a place to sleep . . . you are richer than 75 percent of this world. If you have money in the bank, in your wallet, and spare change in a dish someplace . . . you are among the top eight percent of the world's wealthy.” How many luxuries do we have that we so often take for granted? Let us consider our gifts and say, “Thanks!”

Now for those special occasions in our lives: Marriages, births, a new job, a promotion, a goal met, an honor received . . . and so many more. Let us take the time to savor and appreciate them all, and say “Thanks.”

**Let us always remember to express our gratitude in whatever situation we may find ourselves.**





# THE GIFT OF GRATITUDE

## Give Everlasting Thanks

*“But show kindness to the sons of Barzillai of Gilead and let them be among those who eat at your table. They stood by me when I fled from your brother Absalom.”*

— 1 KINGS 2:7

Where does the name “Jew” come from? The simple explanation is that 2,000 years ago, the kingdom of Israel was split. Ten of the 12 tribes made up “Israel,” while the tribes of Judah and Benjamin became “Judea.” When Judea was exiled (long after Israel was lost), the people coming from Judea were appropriately called “Jews.”

There is a spiritual reason why, of all the tribes, the name Judah persevered. The name Judah was chosen by Leah because Judah is related to the Hebrew word *hoda’a*, which means “thanks.” At the core of Judaism is the quality of gratitude. To be a Jew literally means to be a person of gratitude – constantly aware and thankful for the blessings in our lives.

In 1 Kings chapter 2, David was on his deathbed, and he was passing down his final words to his son. Among the directions that David shared with his son Solomon was this command: *“But show kindness to the sons of Barzillai of Gilead and let them be among those who eat at your table. They stood by me when I fled from your brother Absalom.”*

When David experienced perhaps the most excruciating episode of his life – a rebellion against him led by his very own son, Absalom – Barzillai stood by his side. Many of David’s “friends” and “followers” deserted him, but Barzillai, a wealthy, yet elderly man, stood by the side of his king in loyalty and provided for his needs. As one of David’s last lessons to his son, David taught Solomon about the importance of everlasting gratitude. Even the descendants of Barzillai were to be welcomed guests at the king’s table for years to come.

We are so quick to remember the bad things that people did to us and to forget the good that they did. But King David is teaching us all that we must remember the good that people have done for us forever! The people who have helped us in our lives must always have a place at our table – figuratively and literally.

Take a moment today and think about all the people who have helped you in life – parents, teachers, relatives, or friends. Be grateful; perhaps even express your gratitude to some of those people today.

**When we get in the habit of remembering and feeling grateful for the people in our lives, then we will be one step closer to being constantly thankful to God, the Source of all goodness in our lives.**



## THE GIFT OF GRATITUDE

### Time to Shine

*But as for me, afflicted  
and in pain—  
may your salvation,  
God, protect me.  
I will praise God's name  
in song  
and glorify him with  
thanksgiving.  
This will please the  
LORD more than an ox,  
more than a bull with  
its horns and hooves.*  
— PSALM 69:29-31

Imagine someone saying the following: “Why me? Why does everything happen to me? Why am I happy, healthy, and wealthy? Couldn’t God have picked someone else?”

What I have heard plenty of is the other “why me” – “Why am I the one with (fill in the blank) – illness, money problems, loneliness, etc? Why is it happening to me?”

In Psalm 69 King David reminds us that both of these situations – good times and tough times – are opportunities to connect with God. In fact, the latter circumstance is actually a greater opportunity than the first.

When things are going well, we are challenged to take notice and turn to God in appreciation. These good times are expressed by the psalmist as “*a bull with its horns and hooves*.” Horns are a bull’s means of protecting itself or attacking another animal. They represent power. Hooves allow the bull to stand strong on firm footing. They represent independence.

Together, a bull with horns and hooves symbolizes a person experiencing extremely blessed times when everything seems secure and wonderful. And yet those who have a relationship with God will remember that it is only through His grace that their lives are so blessed. Submitting to God and acknowledging His dominance over the world is expressed as offering a “*bull with its horns and hooves*” to God as a sacrifice. This pleases God.

But there is something even greater.

Have you ever seen the stars out in the daytime? The answer is no. When the sun is shining brightly, we cannot appreciate the light of other stars. It is only in times of darkness that we can appreciate their splendor. In the same way, while it is certainly appropriate to sing God’s praises when everything in our lives is bright and sunny, it’s in the darkness of our lives that we can truly shine.

In Psalm 69, King David was “*afflicted and in pain*” (v. 29). Yet David proclaimed, “*I will praise God’s name in song and glorify him with thanksgiving*.” It’s one thing to praise God when everything is going right. It’s another thing to be grateful when things seem so wrong.

**Take a moment to reflect on your life. No matter how many challenges you might be facing, ask yourself, “What about my life is great?” Thank God for what you do have. Your gratitude will light up your life.**



# THE GIFT OF GRATITUDE

## Declaring God's Praises to Others

Photo: ASHERNET 2012

*Give praise to the LORD,  
proclaim on his name;  
make known among  
the nations what he  
has done.*

— 1 CHRONICLES 16:8

It's not unusual on a Friday night at the *Kotel* (the Western Wall) to hear some of those gathered in prayer spontaneously break out in song. The spirituality of the place is such that emotions can be expected to bubble over.

Indeed, the city of Jerusalem has been witness to such spontaneity ever since the days of King David. The author of Chronicles in Chapter 15 tells us that when the Ark of the Covenant – whose return to Jerusalem David had arranged – entered the holy city, David broke out into joyous celebration along with his subjects. The revelry culminated, as we are told in Chapter 16, with a poem composed by David for the occasion.

The poem begins as follows: “*Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name; make known among the nations what he has done.*” Stirring words, to be sure, but a closer look at the directives might seem a bit confusing. Man is commanded to praise God, but to whom is this praise directed? The first half of this verse indicates that the praise is directed “*to the LORD.*” The latter half, however, explains that this praise should be sung “*among the nations.*” Which is it?

This puzzle can be solved through reference to a fundamental Jewish concept: *kiddush Hashem*, or “sanctification of God’s Name.” All Jews are commanded to strive for *kiddush Hashem*, and, conversely, to avoid *hillul Hashem*, or “profanation of God’s Name.” In other words, God has appointed His people as His agents in this world, and their words and deeds constitute the lens through which others view God.

The idea, therefore, is that when a God-fearing person acts with kindness, maturity and compassion, others will take note and hopefully credit his or her faith in God. If, however, a God-fearing person acts insensitively, or irresponsibly, observers will judge all members of that faith on his or her account. In an acute sense, then, all people of faith are responsible for each other.

This insight explains David’s words. Praise of God is affected *precisely* when people of faith make known among the nations that biblical values lead to a just, charitable, compassionate, and ethical lifestyle.

**We must therefore remember, as David did, that the *admirable* actions of a single individual may go a long way to glorifying God’s name throughout the world – to making a *kiddush Hashem*.**