

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

Vayeitzei 5783

The Talmud (B'rachot 7b) makes a surprising comment in the name of R. Shimon bar Yochai regarding the naming of Leah's fourth son, Yehuda: "Since Gd created His world, no one arose to thank HaShem until Leah came to thank Him" (as the name Yehuda defines as thankfulness). The Torah Temima (29:35, #9) raises the obvious question: Was there really no one who thanked Gd before Leah? He then marshals a number of sources proving that indeed others - from Adam and on - most certainly expressed their gratitude to Gd.

In a previous chizuk (5780), we shared the rather unusual explanation of Rav Soloveitchik on this question who opines that Leah was prepared to thank HaShem even when her most fervent wish - to be truly loved by her husband, Yaakov - was denied her. To have the powerful faith to be able to thank Gd even when your deepest hopes are frustrated and dashed is a level of gratitude that is rare indeed.

Let us now suggest three additional answers to the above question. The first: Rashi comments (30:35) that Leah was the first to thank HaShem

for receiving more than she was entitled to. If Yaakov had four wives and there were to be twelve tribes, the initial assumption was that each wife would give birth to three. When Leah was blessed with her fourth, Yehuda, she knew she had exceeded her share and therefore chose to mark the event with an expression of thanksgiving.

Upon Rashi's comment, the Chidushei HaRim derives this important lesson. Everything we have - all our material possessions - are actually Gd's, who, as ADO-NAI, is the Master and Owner of the world, the Sovereign who exercises exclusive rights over everything and everybody by virtue of His being its Creator. As such, all of a person's organs, talents, and capabilities belong to Gd and are only on loan to man. Therefore, when we misuse and misappropriate our range of human assets, Gd has every right to take them back. Since no person is perfect, we are all, on some level, undeserving of that which HaShem has vouchsafed to us. Indeed, we are forever beholden and indebted to Him. And yet, the fact that notwithstanding our existential liabilities, Gd continues to bestow upon us His manifold blessings, is reason enough to thank Him and thank Him again!

The second: Rav Shalom Messas, the

Rav of Jerusalem was once invited to speak in a Yeshiva. After completing his shiur, he began descending the staircase and accidentally dropped his cane. Several students jumped to pick up and return the cane to the elderly Rav. Rav Messas refused and easily walked down the stairs without his cane. The students were shocked how well he walked without his cane and asked why he used it since it did not appear that he required the assistance of the cane. The Rav explained that ten years earlier, he underwent a dangerous surgical procedure, and it was not clear whether or not he would be able to walk again. After months of physical therapy, miraculously, he was totally cured and able to walk on his own. In order to express his gratitude to HaShem, he decided to use a cane, although not necessary, so that he would constantly be reminded of the grace of God, who miraculously healed him.

The lesson is clear, while Adam and others likely praised and thanked Gd, it was only on occasion. Leah, however, was the first to call her son Yehuda - a name that would serve as a constant reminder to be thankful for the blessings she received. It is not enough to simply say "thank you" once in a while. We ought to constantly express our gratitude.

Indeed, upon awakening every single day, we immediately express our profound gratitude to HaShem when we say, MODEH ANI ...

And finally, the Hebrew word for "admitting" and the Hebrew word for "giving thanks" are one and the same. In Hebrew, we say, "I am MODEH - I admit - that I owe you", and we also say, MODIM ANACHNU LACH - we give thanks before You." Rav Yitzchok Hutner explains that this linguistic relationship suggests that by thanking someone for what they gave or did for me, I am admitting that I need their favor, and that prior to their gift, I was somewhat incomplete. This is why it is sometimes quite hard for us to say "thank you"; it is simply too difficult for us to admit that we need someone else. Thus, when we do express gratitude, the very act of thanking actually creates an interdependence - a genuine bondsmanship between two people - which ultimately becomes the catalyst of meaningful and enduring relationships.

Leah, perhaps intuitively, knew of this truth; according to Rashbi, she was the first. Thus, by calling her son Yehuda - Yehuda who was destined to be the ancestor of kings and Mashiach - she was underscoring the reality that if the unity of a people -

as led by a "Yehuda" - rests upon the interconnectedness - the shared responsibility that each must assume for one another - then that supreme national value of mutual appreciation must be predicated upon the courage of each member of that collective to say and mean, "thank you". And who best to inculcate that moral doctrine than King/Yehuda!

For all of the above reasons and perhaps more, it should now be clear why, in gratitude to Leah, we, as Jews, are all called Yehudim. May we only merit living up to that sacred attribution. 🙌