

Yom Kippur, Kol Nidre - Friday, September 29

Our Two Names: Yehudim and Yisrael, Gratitude and Struggle by Rabbi Mychal Copeland

Each of us has a name,
given to us by G!d,
and given to us by the planets.

Each of us has a name,
given to us by the mountains,
and given to us by our walls.

Each of us has a name,
given to us by our longing,

and given to us by our love.

We learn from Torah that names are significant-they always tell us something profound about their subjects. It follows that a tradition that never has just one answer to any question doesn't have just one name either. We have two names that have been in a dance together over centuries. Yehudim and Yisrael, Jews, and the Children of Israel.

In the Book of Genesis, Jacob marries two sisters, the matriarchs Leah and Rachel. Jacob has made no secret that Rachel is the one he loves. As Leah begins bearing, she names she chooses for her first three sons, Rueben, Shimon, and Levi, reveal in their meanings this complicated love triangle. What power she harnesses as she collects her pain and names each child reflecting her hopes for her husband's love! When Leah bears a fourth son, however, something changes in her. She names him Yehuda, literally, "Thank G!d," and says "This time, I am grateful to G!d." And then she stopped bearing. Rabbi Harold Kushner describes Leah's transformation in this way: "Now, with this fourth son, her mood changes from rivalry to gratitude...Her heartfelt prayer of thanks reflects her having grown from self-concern and a focus on what she lacked to a genuine sense of appreciation for what was hers." (Etz Chayim p.174) She is grateful, thankful for this gift. We are the people of Yehuda, Judeans, Yehudim, Jews. The thankful ones.

Yet throughout the Torah, we are not **yet** called Yehudim. We are called by our other name, B'nai Yisrael, the Children of Israel. This name emerges also in the book of Genesis when Jacob struggles all night long with an angel of G!d, and survives. In the morning, the angel changes his name from Jacob to Yisrael, saying, "You have wrestled with God and with men and you have prevailed." His very being has changed, and the Torah teaches us that such a life transformation necessitates a new name-in this case, a name given by G!d. Throughout the Torah, beginning with the moment at Mt. Sinai when we become a people, we are called B'nai Yisrael, the children of Israel. We are wrestlers. We will fight until dawn in sacred struggle and we will survive.

We are Yehudim *and* Yisrael. We are the thankful ones, AND we are the ones who struggle. Ask yourself if you feel more comfortable with one or the other. I am not asking if you are a glass-half-full or a glass-half-empty kind of person. But, do you tend to live your life *more* in gratitude or in sacred struggle? Or do the two dance together nicely?

Let's begin diving into Yehudim—we are the thankful ones.

People ask me what Judaism is all about. (Yes this really happens! A standing on one foot moment!) **My answer is that life is sacred and holy, and the *practice* of Judaism is really all about gratitude. It gives us daily tools to lift up individual moments as sacred.**

We take nothing for granted. We don't take for granted that we are not hungry, that our bodies work as well as they do, and that our breath is returned to us for another day. Liturgist Marcia Falk writes that a *brachah*, a blessing, is a reminder to appreciate a moment, to take it in (*The Book of Blessings*). Stop to make it sacred. To make it stand out amongst all the other moments of our lives. We also mark painful times, not so we can clean them up and make them appear like blessings in disguise, but so we can also mark *them* as sacred.

Built into the fabric of Judaism is the idea that we should constantly be thankful for what IS. One of my favorite prayers is: Baruch...she'cacha lo b'olamo. "Blessed is G!d, Creator of Time and Space, who created the world CACHA- exactly as it is".

Contemporary teachers of Mussar, a Jewish ethical practice, have created gratitude journals and questions that help develop a practice of writing or taking time to think about those moments-every day. But our liturgy already invites us to do just that. Tomorrow morning, we will begin our service with a list of things we are grateful for -Bircot Ha-shachar. I find this one of the wisest gifts from the Jewish tradition we've been handed. I invite you to try every morning saying either one of these blessings or make up your own. Once you begin this practice, I can tell you from experience that walking through your morning without some dedicated moments of gratitude is likely to feel lacking, empty.

The Hebrew term for gratitude is *hakarat ha'tov*. It literally means "to recognize the good." Author MJ Ryan writes that, "Gratitude is like a flashlight. It lights up what is already there. You don't necessarily have anything more or different, but suddenly you can actually see what is."

We decide whether it goes by unnoticed or if gets lifted up. We learn in our ancient Jewish practice manual, the Talmud, that we should say 100 blessings a day. That sounds overwhelming! But perhaps we were not to take it so literally. The teaching is that we should be in a constant state of praise. Not so it gets in the way of living life, but to deepen our experience of *being* alive. This mitzvah TRAINS us to stop and appreciate, to live with a gracious state of mind. We practice it every day, because on some days its easy; on others it feels like an unfair request. Even if things aren't looking good at the moment, perhaps especially when we are suffering or see suffering around us, we are to stop and make a moment sacred and appreciate what there *is* rather than what there is not.

In Jewish tradition, we are thankful for both the exceptional moments *and* the mundane ones. In the morning prayer, *asher yatzar* (sometimes known as the bathroom prayer), we are thankful for our bodies, and recognize our inability to function when something is not working as it should.

Our gratitude practice is about *recognizing subtleties*. Our holidays teach us to lift up special times but also to notice what might go unnoticed. We celebrate Tu B'shvat, the new year of the trees, not when they are full in the spring, but in late winter just as the sap begins running through the bark. We wouldn't notice it—that magnificent moment of potential— if we waited until it was obvious. Likewise, I have learned from yoga, my other spiritual practice, that if one toe is out of line, that subtlety can affect my entire body's alignment.

We are thankful for the gift of food— and by saying the *brachot* for our nourishment we are forced to get beyond the package we opened and think about where it came from, who helped cultivate it, who drove it to our convenience store. There is a prayer to say upon seeing a rainbow, for hearing good news, for hearing bad news, even for experiencing an earthquake. Upon seeing the ocean, for seeing people who look different from ourselves. Upon meeting with a friend who has recovered from a life threatening illness. Gratitude is the antidote to regret (something we will hear more about in tomorrow's sermon). We don't regret when we have been marking sacred moments along the way.

The the daily practice of noticing that could transform our lives, was built into Jewish practice almost two thousand years ago.

Who are we thanking, anyway? Is it G!d? Is it something else? One of the most common complaints I hear about Judaism is about praise in our prayers. The prayerbook is filled with heaping praise upon praise for G!d, and while some are able to enter into this language, many find themselves wondering about the nature of a G!d who needs such lauding. The *kaddish* is a good example—it's such a poignant prayer in its original Aramaic, but I haven't met one service leader who wanted to do it in translation: May G!d's name be blessed, and praised, and glorified, and held in honor, viewed with awe, embellished, and revered...and on and on. The way I understand these prayers is that indeed it is partially about G!d—of course a G!d we all envision differently. But regardless of how theological we are or aren't, it's ALL about gratitude. Most of us don't believe in a G!d that needs to hear praise, but rather WE need constant reminders to express gratitude. Meister Eckhart, the German theologian, wrote that “If the only prayer you ever said in your whole life was ‘Thank you’, that would suffice.” He isn't concerned with *who* you thank. Just say it. In the end, does it really matter? Perhaps for you it is G!d, or the miracle of science, or the mystery of life...Does any of that change how grateful we are to be alive in this instant? Does it matter what language we say it in? Our Yom Kippur liturgy will not let us push aside the stark reality that it will end. So we soak in every moment of being here. As one of the poems in our machzor muses, “Statistically, the probability of any one of us being here is so small that you'd think the mere fact of existing would keep us all in a contented dazzlement of surprise...You'd think we'd never stop dancing.” (p.127, Lewis Thomas)

And now for the flip side. Some may be lamenting the time I just took to talk about gratitude because it was such a waste of time! Nothing was improved by spending time appreciating ourselves, our lives, or a moment that is already past. Our world is a mess. How dare we

appreciate what it looks like? For you—we arrive at Yisrael, our struggling name. To be a descendant of Israel is to challenge the status quo, to hold ourselves to a higher standard, to demand that, as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught, “what ought to be *will* be.”

The machzor in our hands lists our transgressions from the past year to help us transform ourselves and the world we live in. Not I, but WE have acted wrongly...I don't just want *myself* to improve. I need to improve *you*, too! I want everyone, everything to look more like it should. Like the Garden of Eden. It's what keeps us striving, struggling, fixing...and complaining. We can be a kvetchy lot—just the fact that this is one of the Yiddish words that has crept into the English language tells us that we take on this adjective with such delight that it had to be carried with us into our new, ideal America. We are proud of it, because we know that to kvetch is to never give up hope that things can be better. And we are willing to put in the work to make it so.

In fact, for tikkun olam, repair of the world, to occur, it is clear that WE are responsible.

Where Yehuda was about appreciating this moment, Yisrael is about using everything we've got in this present moment to make things better in the next. Perhaps it's why Jews have been so well represented in social change movements. We are never satisfied. Even if we spend a moment appreciating, we quickly jump ahead to thinking about how things could be more perfect. It could be something inherent in our texts (Jacob's struggle, Abraham's argument with G!d to save the people of Sodom and Gomorrah), or it could be that being kicked around the globe for centuries has instilled in us a call to not sit still while others are suffering like we have. We are the quintessential “other” in history and align ourselves with every other “other.” Right now, that means there is little time to rest.

We *embrace* our collective sense of anxiety. What would Woody Allen do without it! My colleague Rabbi Jonathan Kligler writes that one of the things he loves about being Jewish is “the way we have taken our tenuous position in the world and developed a delicious sense of humor and irony about life's precariousness.” We should cherish this response to angst. Own it— it is ours and we come by it honestly.

How it is that we are supposed to be in a constant state of appreciation for what IS... if we also believe deeply that nothing we or anyone else does...is ever enough? How do we live in the space of what Heschel called “Radical Amazement,” being in awe of life itself...if we revel in looking around and saying “Blah—this isn't even a fraction of what it *could* be?” On Rosh Hashanah I spoke about the need right now to wake up and show up. But at a time when we are so distraught at the world around us, does that mean we have to be constantly dissatisfied?

Now we sit together on YK, and we vacillate between our two names. We spend time being thankful for having been granted another year of life when we know how delicate it is. And we spend equal time trying to figure out how we can transform ourselves and our world.

This teaching of our two names has resonated for me over recent years, but I am finding myself revisiting it at *this* moment in time with the particular challenges we are facing. What do we do when we feel caught between the two poles of gratitude and struggle? How do we hold both

Yehudim and Yisrael in all the realms of our lives, from the personal, to the interpersonal, to our community and to the world at a time like this?

We always start with ourselves. On a PERSONAL level: Some of us are really good at beating ourselves up and horrible at appreciating who we are. Others have trouble seeing personal flaws and readily turn criticism outward onto others. How do we balance the impulse toward Yisrael: "I know I could be better," and Yehudim: "I am really quite amazing!"? At the High Holydays, we work to transform ourselves. But we need to also appreciate the life we've been given and the uniqueness of who we are.

How do we hold both gratitude and struggle IN OUR RELATIONSHIPS: A suggestion for an exercise this season. Think through each of your important relationships. Ask yourself about Yisrael: where are they in need of mending, attention? And then Yehudim: what can you appreciate about them, even if they aren't perfect?

How do we balance these in OUR COMMUNITY: At Sha'ar Zahav, we strive to hold them both. Yes, we want it to be perfect (I'm guilty of this!). But we also appreciate each other for lifelong friendship, a community where we can bring our whole selves.

Finally, how do we hold both Yehudim and Yisrael in OUR WORLD: Right now, we might feel like sinking into gratitude will cause us to forget for a moment the work we have to do. It won't. I guarantee you-there will still be tons to do when you're done appreciating what we have.

Waking up and showing up is not all about the struggling Yisrael. We wake up and show up by being thankful as well. We won't know what needs fixing tomorrow if we didn't fully take in today how wonderful it was before it fell apart. If I was thankful for my body yesterday morning, I really feel today when it's not right. If I said a gratitude prayer yesterday that I'm free, I feel it deeply today when my rights are being chipped away. I don't have to wait until they are gone because I have been practicing appreciating every little, seemingly unimportant thing. Every subtlety. It is never a waste of time to stop and appreciate.

What power we harness when we choose a name for ourselves. In a community where so many of us, including myself - for one reason or another - have claimed our own names, I ask you to think in this reflective time, what name calls to you? Is it one of the names of our people, Yehudah, the grateful one, or Yisrael, the struggler? Or is it a different name, a small quiet voice that only you hear?

Each of us has a name,
given to us by the seasons of the year,
and given to us by our blindness.

Each of us has a name,
given to us by the sea,
and given to us by our death.

-Zelda

Note: Jews typically do not spell out the name of the Divine to respect the power of names, especially holy names. I use a “!” instead of the traditional “-” to connote the awe – the radical amazement - we hope to feel in our lives no matter what we name it.