

## RABBI'S MESSAGE

### A New Look at Gratitude

The entire month of November builds toward the season of Thanksgiving...and Thanksgiving is a good time to focus on our values related to gratitude. We visualize images of sharing a grand meal with beloved family members and friends and put a pause on diets to indulge in the most delicious foods. Many will also take time to offer appreciation of the abundant gifts we've received from the Blessed Holy One. Thanksgiving begins the season of gratitude, leading toward the rest of the "holiday season" that may include vacation time, parties and the giving and receiving of more human and material gifts.

It is important to acknowledge that the classic vision of Thanksgiving does not appear for everyone. Some tables may include empty spaces that were once filled by loved ones who are no longer present. Perhaps the person who brought the family together has passed away, and things just aren't "the same." Adult children may have moved away and have their own families to visit. Some families have experienced such strife that a holiday gathering doesn't work like it might have in the past. Some families have been separated by strong disagreements and feel too estranged to get together. Or perhaps financial hardship or health situations make any kind of expected celebration produce more stress than joy. For one reason or other, this time of that is designated for togetherness could be a very lonely time.

During difficult, lonely times, it is not easy to look at what we have versus what we lack. One of the most complicated books of the Bible is Job. When things were wonderful for Job, he praised G-d. When everything fell apart, he praised G-d. "The LORD gives, the LORD takes away; blessed be the name of the LORD." (Job 1:21) We learn from Job that everything that is precious is temporary. That is a hard lesson, especially because Job's abundance was SO abundant, and his hardships were SO hard. Despite his suffering, Job became content with how his life had changed. This Biblical tale is cryptic in nature, but with careful study, it's possible to find connections to real and personal situations.

I have found myself repeatedly inspired by a book called *The Beggar King and the Secret to Happiness*. The author, Joel ben Izzy, mixes in his personal true story around a legend about King Solomon. In the midrashic story about the wise king, Solomon is mysteriously thrown out of his kingdom and wanders the world as an anonymous beggar. Nobody he encounters believes he is the king, and he suffers beatings and abuse until he acquiesces to finding legitimate work and struggles as a laborer. After a journey of many surprisingly difficult years, he finds his way back to his kingdom. A changed person from the experience, Solomon rules much differently as the ruler who knows what it is like to suffer. Ben Izzy was a successful professional storyteller/performing artist who lost his voice to throat cancer. No longer able to use the talents he had been blessed with, he had to find other ways to communicate. At first, like Solomon, he felt he had lost his sense of self because his identity was wrapped up in his role. Like Solomon, Joel ben Izzy was able to find his voice in other ways to develop a different self that was enhanced by his experiences.

As we approach the season of Thanksgiving, if our celebrations are filled with joy, perhaps we can find ways to include others who may not be feeling the same way. And if holiday time feels more stressful than joyous, perhaps we can look at the lessons we learn from changes in our lives. Whether or not these changes are welcome or expected, we can evolve an identity and sense of self to create new ways to be grateful.

L'shalom,

*Rabbi Dan Gordon*