

Getting to Gratitude - OIC Thanksgiving Interfaith Service 2023

Just last week, after visiting someone who was ill, I stepped into the elevator to return to the lobby and go to my car. Two women stepped inside also, and noticing my kippah, one asked me, “how are you?” The sincerity on her face nearly brought me to tears. “Managing,” I replied, searching for words, “this has been difficult.” “We support Israel,” she said, “me and my whole community.” I thanked her and smiled a little. Though the interaction was brief, it has stayed with me. I am grateful for her kind words, and the sense that we are not alone. **Getting to Gratitude step one:** Be grateful for kind words and generous souls.

I’ve been making concerted efforts each day, to be grateful, and to wake up and say the first prayer upon awakening, “Modah Ani,” the prayer thanking the Source of Life for breath itself, and the soul within my body. Usually this is a prayer that I say easily, as I am truly grateful for life, for breath, and for soul, but since October 7th, I wake and unbidden, the first thing I think about are the nearly 240 hostages. I try not to think too much – about where they might be, and their physical, mental, and spiritual condition. But those thoughts do not remain at bay. I think also about those who were terrorized, butchered, and burnt – 1200 human beings – not just Jews, regardless of age, gender, and physical ability. These thoughts are scattered throughout my day. I remind myself to compartmentalize, that for the sake of my self, family, relationships, work, and more, I breathe in and out, and in again, and resolve to direct my attention to that which I can do. **Getting to Gratitude step two:** Be grateful for purpose, meaningful work, family, friends, and community.

In community, we Jews are mourning, we are grieving. The people who were brutally killed and those taken hostage on October 7th are our family. Noam E. Marans authored this recent post in the Times of Israel:

“There are no six degrees of separation for the Jewish people. These are our brothers and sisters who live in Israel, literally in many cases, including my own. This is our Jewish homeland, where half of world Jewry has tried, mostly successfully, to create a safe haven. Jewish history has been transformed by the existence of the State of Israel and the eradication of Jewish powerlessness manifest in its Holocaust nadir, but Oct. 7 has shaken those assumptions. We will not allow a return to that era. We are a strong people. We will prevail.” He continues: “We mourn not only the Jewish victims of the massacre but all the

victims, including the Arab citizens of Israel who were slaughtered, and remain deeply concerned about all the hostages, regardless of background. The suffering of innocent Gazans wrought by Hamas's inhumane tactics weighs heavily upon us."¹

If anyone does not know about Hamas, Hamas is a militant terrorist organization, and their charter is on the internet for all to see - their ideology and purpose is to eradicate Israel and does not acknowledge Israel or its right to exist. Hamas and those in support, raised their voices in celebration and joy on October 7th.

We are taught in Proverbs 24:17, "If your enemy falls, do not exult; If he trips, let your heart not rejoice." When Pharaoh's army drowned as the waters of the Sea of Reeds engulfed them, our Sages teach that God admonished his angels: "My handiwork is drowning in the sea, and you want to sing songs of praise?" We do not rejoice in the downfall of others. Indeed, our hearts break for a world that seems so far from peace. I am grateful for a broken heart, for the ability to mourn and grieve, for mourning reveals a soul that loves. Within grief there is hope, hope for the mending of the broken heart, hope for new life, and renewed life.

Getting to Gratitude step three: Even mourning and grief remind us of love we hold in our hearts, and the hope for a better tomorrow.

Virulent anti-Israelism has morphed into a frightening escalation of antisemitism. It took only hours for people to gather with signs declaring Israel to be genocidal and for many to celebrate October 7th, and to blame Israel itself for the atrocities committed that day by Hamas. This antisemitism continues, happening at just the moment when we Jews are in deep mourning. Wearing a yarmulke or other signs of Jewish identity are now perilous. Wearing a kippah, a star of David, or setting a Chanukah menorah in the window should not be perilous or heroic. Just being a Jewish student on campus is fraught with worry, at best. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, of blessed memory wrote: "The best response to terror is not anger, but the quiet strength to carry on, not giving way to fear. Terror fails and will always fail because it arouses in us a profound instinct for life."²

¹ [To Christian leaders: Your Jewish neighbors need you | Noam E. Marans | The Blogs \(timesofisrael.com\)](#) Nov 11, 2023.

² The Power of Ideas: Words of Faith and Wisdom. Pg 80-81.

Getting to Gratitude step four: Gratitude for the ability to choose one's response, and for the quiet strength to carry on. I am grateful for life and the love of life, even amid the chaos we are in.

In Hebrew the word, peace, is *shalom*. Sometimes it feels elusive. Our Torah and our Sages teach us to seek peace and pursue it. We are a people who strive to do *tikkun olam*, to heal the world. Torah teaches us that we are each made in the likeness of the Divine and thus each human being is unique and precious. Torah teaches us about the first brothers of the Torah, Cain and Abel, and that Cain killed his brother Abel. The rest of the Torah seeks repair of that first violent act of fratricide. Indeed, my teachers and their teachers have always taught that the whole Torah comes to teach us to be a mensch, a good person. That's the whole Torah. The rest is commentary. The commentary is important too. Included in the commentary is the teaching of Hillel: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?"³ This is the airline attendant who instructs, put the mask on yourself first – but it doesn't end there –you must then attend to the person next to you.

Elie Weisel once said, "Peace is a very special gift – it is our gift to each other."⁴ We must seek peace, but we must also balance that with taking care of ourselves. Why must we take care of ourselves? Well, for you and me it is self-care. For some, it is for self-preservation. Why self-preservation? Because there are those in the world who cannot abide by those who are different, whether from ignorance, fear, jealousy, and even hate.

In his book, *The Power of Ideas: Words of Faith and Wisdom*, Rabbi Sacks taught:
...a society that has no room for difference has no room for humanity. The appearance of antisemitism is always an early warning sign of a dangerous dysfunction within a culture because the hate that begins with Jews never ends with Jews. At the end of his life, Moses told the Israelites: 'Don't hate an Egyptian because you were strangers in his land.' It's an odd sentence. The Egyptians had oppressed and enslaved the Israelites. So why did Moses say, 'Don't hate'? Because if the people continued to hate, Moses would have taken the Israelites out of Egypt, but failed to take Egypt out of the Israelites. They would still be slaves, not physically but mentally. Moses knew that to be free you have to let go of hate. Wherever there is hate, freedom dies, which is why each of us, especially

³ Pirke Avot 1:14

⁴ Elie Weisel, Reform Judaism Magazine interview by Aron Hirt-Manheimer in 2005

we leaders, have to take a stand against the corrosive power of hate. All it takes for evil to flourish is for good people to do nothing.⁵

We may ask, what can we do? I suggest a focus on education. For ourselves, for our children, and all the children of the world. Allow me tell you a story from the bible⁶: With the exodus from Egypt just hours away, God instructed Moses that he and the generations after him were to build their civilization. Not by constructing large buildings, not by ruling over nations or other peoples, but by being teachers, by becoming a people who teach their children to practice righteousness and justice, saying “You shall teach these things diligently to your children.” (Deuteronomy 6:7)

Of great concern is that many children in our world are being taught to hate. Our views of the world have become about us and them and a prioritizing of “me” over “we”. Let us instead teach righteousness, compassion, ethics and justice. Let us visit the sick, help the needy, give comfort to those in crisis, and bring moments of kindness and even joy, and model that for our children. Education includes being of service. Education is more than resume skills. Education must include clear thinking, moral clarity, and the ability to question, in order for ourselves and our children to navigate both the present and the future. **Getting to Gratitude step five:** Gratitude for children to love and to teach, to nurture and to grow.

It has taken me some effort to get to gratitude, and I have been fortunate to speak my mind so openly this evening, and I thank you for your generous listening. I am grateful. I am grateful too, for our capacity to learn and grow, love and forgive, grieve and heal.

Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech Ha-Olam, Blessed are You, Source of Life, who gives us life and blesses us with community.

May we be blessed with a meaningful day of Thanksgiving, and all that we need to work towards *Shalom*, Peace, and getting to gratitude.

Rabbi Lisa Bock

⁵ Sacks, Jonathan. *The Power of Ideas: Words of Faith and Wisdom* (p. 61). John Murray Press. Kindle Edition.

⁶ An oft-told teaching of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z”l, paraphrased.