

WHEN GRATITUDE IS HARD TO COME BY
A Homily Delivered on the Sunday before Thanksgiving
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First Parish in Needham, Unitarian Universalist
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Sometimes it's hard to be thankful. There is a story in Jewish tradition that comes to mind. It was the holiest night of the year, the evening on which Yom Kippur begins. Looking out into the congregation, the rabbi noticed that many who never came for weekly services were there. But missing was his most faithful member, Yitzhak the tailor. Worried about his faithful friend, he went over to Yitzhak's little house after the service.

But he didn't find him sick in bed. He found him sitting at a table, with a candle burning, pouring over a list. "Why did you not come to the service where we all acknowledge all of our sins before God?" asked the rabbi.

"As I went over all my sins for this last year," said Yitzhak, "just as we are told to do, I started writing this list. "Late in getting the widow Kaufman her cloak repaired," I wrote. But then I thought, "But what about God, who was late with the rains this year, so that the harvest was poor, and so many people went hungry or even starved. So I wrote that down in a second column. And for every sin I committed, like getting angry with my children, I thought of something God had done, or failed to do, like not stopping wars, despite all our prayers for peace. And soon my list of sins was long, but my list of God's sins was even longer, until I finally shouted out to him, 'Listen, I may have sinned this year, but why should I give you praise and thanks? Your sins were much, greater!'"

But the story doesn't end there. The rabbi said, "You fool! You had Him at the time when all must answer for their sins, but you let Him go! You let him get away!"

I was lying in bed earlier this week, after my knee surgery. Trying to distract myself from the pain, and starting to think about what I would say this morning, when I found this story in a collection by a great modern rabbi, Lawrence Kushner. This bold arguing with God is part of Jewish tradition, he points out. It goes all the way back to stories of Abraham arguing with God about destroying Sodom and Gommorah, about destroying the innocent along with guilty. The tailor was in that tradition, saying, "Just who do You think You are, asking us to be grateful? for a world like this, full of pain and suffering?"

But this supposes that God is out there, somewhere. Far away, distant. But what if you believe, as Kushner and I do, that "it's all God"? Then how do we argue with what we ourselves are made of? It means that to pray is partly to talk to yourself, in deep honesty. It means that we can no long put all the blame for what goes wrong here on earth off on some distant, omnipotent God. Even the late rain could be the result of climate changes we contributed to. Because then God talks back, holding up a mirror to us, and saying, "And just who do you think you are, to be complaining! You're lucky just to be here!"

And then I began to think how miraculous it was that my surgery had gone so smoothly. or that, when I injured my knee, there were such skilled people available to help me. Such loving friends now reaching out with offers of help, cooking meals, offering rides. And I began to feel grateful – especially for the serendipity of finding a story for today.

“If you want to preach a good homily,” said a wise old bishop to his young clergy, “first, get a story to begin with, then get a story to end with, and then get the former as close to the latter as possible, while still making your point!”

So here’s the story Kushner’s book also provided to end with.

A long time ago in the town of Safed, in what is now the north of Israel, the richest man around was dozing off, as usual during the morning service on Shabbat. Every once in a while he would almost wake up, trying to get comfortable in his seat, but then he would doze off again. That morning he awoke just long enough to hear a part of the Torah reading, one where God tells the people to bring him twelve loaves of leavened bread, *challah*, and leave them on a table in the tabernacle.

When the service ended, and the man woke up fully, he had the distinct impression that God had spoken to him in a dream, asking him to bring Him twelve loaves of *challah*. Honored that God would favor him with such a direct message, the rich man went home also feeling a little foolish. Of all the things God could ask for, a few loaves of bread didn’t seem very important. But who was he, after all, to argue with the Holy One?

So he went home, and, the next day, after the Sabbath, ordered the bread to be baked. Then he took it to the synagogue, where he decided that the only place to put it was directly in front of the Torah scrolls, in the ark, upon the *bimah*. So he arranged the loaves there, where the Lord could see them, he thought, and said prayerfully, “Thank you, Lord, for telling me so clearly what you want of me. Pleasing you is such a high honor!” Then he left.

The next person to enter the synagogue was the poorest Jew in the whole community, who earned a few coins each week for cleaning up the synagogue after the Sabbath. Sweeping as he did so, and knowing he was alone, he began to talk aloud to God, saying, “Lord, you know poor I am. But now my family is nearly starving. And the price of bread is so high! Unless you perform a miracle for us, my poor children may well perish soon.”

Then he looked up, toward the ark on the *bimah*. It was still open, with the Torah scrolls visible, and there, before them and among, sat twelve loaves of freshly baked *challah*. “It’s a miracle!” the poor man exclaimed. And he ran home to his family with the bread, closing the ark reverently with prayers of thanks.

A little later, the rich man returned, curious to see if God had eaten his bread offering. But the ark was now closed, so he opened it, there was no bread to be found inside. “Lord!” he exclaimed. “You have eaten and accepted the bread You told be to bring You! And I thought you were teasing! This is wonderful! I’ll make you more, this time with

raisins!” So he went home and, before the next Shabbat, had the baker deliver to him thirteen loaves – one for his table, and twelve for the Lord. He left them inside the ark.

Minutes later, the poor man arrived, to clean the synagogue before the weekly service. “Lord,” he prayed. “I don’t know how to say this, but we are out of food again. Seven loaves we ate, four we sold for milk for the children, one we gave away to a poor widow. But now nothing is left, and unless you provide another miracle we will surely starve.” He approached the ark with trembling, opened it, and there found twelve more loaves.”

“Another miracle!” he cried. “Twelve more loaves, with raisins, too! Thank you, God!”

This weekly exchange of challah became a ritual. It went on for months, then for years. And like most rituals that become routine, neither man reflected much about its meaning. Then one day the rabbi, staying in the sanctuary longer than usual, saw the rich man place the twelve loaves in the ark and the poor man come and redeem them. He called them together, and told them what he had seen.

“I see,” said the rich man, crestfallen, “God doesn’t really eat my challah.”

“I see,” said the poor man, “God really hasn’t been baking miraculous bread for me and my poor family.”

They both looked as though the presence of the Holy had just gone out of both their lives.

“Look at your hands,” said the rabbi. “Your hands,” he said to the rich man, “are the hands of God giving food to the poor. And your hands,” he said to the poor man, “are the hands of God, receiving the gifts you need, gifts of God through this man. So you see, the Holy One is present in both your lives. Continue the baking and the taking. Both are holy. God is in all of it. Your hands are the hands of God here on earth.”

When gratitude comes hard, remember this: the pain and suffering of the world are real. But so are miracles. Giving and receiving in humility and love is the greatest of them.