

What is the relationship between gratitude and happiness? Why is gratitude so important? And, what does religion have to say about it? Does Judaism say anything unexpected?



Although Judaism has endured its share of challenges as a religion, culture, and community, its traditions and teachings emphatically promote gratitude. It is too easy, Jewish sources say, to fall back on the simple route of being dissatisfied with life and focusing on what you lack. True gratitude requires an honest accounting of what you do have, an accounting of which, Judaism argues, will allow you to acknowledge the blessings which are a part of your life. Woven into thousands of years of Jewish thought is the overriding idea that taking time to recognize what you have in life is one of the uniquely beneficial rituals we can undertake.

As this episode begins, Hanan and his father each approaches the very human experience of comparing what one has to what others have, but they do so from two very different places. Hanan's father can't seem to see beyond his feelings of envy, while Hanan tells his father over and over again to "be grateful." Gratitude, Hanan tries to explain, can offer more than his father might think.

First, Hanan says, gratitude will enable his father to not only have enough, but to have more than enough. Second, being grateful will force his father to stay in the reality of the present moment and benefit from the actual experience of life instead of living in the "reality of expectations." And, third, Hanan points out that there is a connection between humility and being grateful.

① BEING GRATEFUL – HOW TO HAVE NOT JUST ENOUGH, BUT MORE THAN ENOUGH

Hanan begins his conversation with his dad by referring to a classic Jewish folktale. The "goat story" is his first attempt to help his father take stock of what he actually has instead of what he thinks he lacks. By doing so, his father might find he is more than satisfied with his current situation.

Hanan's telling of this story echoes ideas in classic Jewish teaching. One of the most recognized and quoted texts in Jewish thought is *Pirke Avot*. Full of aphorisms that teach about the potential for living a more fulfilled life, *Pirke Avot* (written around the year 200 CE) offers the following:

Who is rich? Those who rejoice in their own portion

Pirke Avot 4:1

- While this is a seemingly simple statement, what is the deeper meaning? Do you find that it is difficult to be grateful for what you have? What would make it easier to acknowledge the good things in your life?
- How realistic is it to always be grateful for the good things in your life? What gets in the way of gratitude?
- How do you acknowledge the things you value in your life, and how often?
- Do you often think about the things you lack rather than acknowledging the things you do have?
- Is there a difference between simply recognizing what you have and being grateful for what you have? If so, what is the nature of the difference?
- It is easy to fall into the trap of comparing yourself to others. How can being grateful help establish a sense of not only having enough, but having more than enough?
- What are the benefits of acknowledging the good things in your life more frequently?
- Are you more like Hanan or his father in relating to the goat story? Who responds more honestly?

② THE “REALITY OF EXPECTATIONS”

A transitional moment in the episode occurs when Hanan describes being stuck in the past and anticipating the future as “the reality of expectations” instead of the reality of the present moment. He emphatically explains that you have to be present in order to truly experience life and you must be flexible enough to be able to make the most out of life.. And one sure way to be in the present moment, Hanan says, is to be grateful.

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov (1772 – 1810) was one of the great mystical minds in Jewish tradition and the great grandson of the Ba’al Shem Tov. Over his lifetime, he revealed mystical and moral teachings for the Jewish community, highlighting the ability of every person to access these lessons. Rebbe Nachman’s teachings were ultimately compiled by his chief disciple, Reb Noson. His writings emphasize the concept of “being present” by questioning the necessity and human understanding of, and connection to, time.

A person with complete understanding knows that time in this world is really nothing. The sensation of time stems from deficient understanding. The greater one’s understanding, the more one sees and understands that in reality, time does not exist.

We can actually feel how time flies like a passing shadow and a cloud that will soon disappear. If you take this to heart you will be free of worries about mundane matters and you will have the strength and determination to snatch what you can – a good deed here, a lesson there – in order to gain something that is truly enduring out of this life. You will gain the life of the eternal world, which is completely beyond time.

Rebbe Nachman finishes the preceding thought by saying:

You must make sure you set aside a time each day when you can reflect calmly on everything you are doing and the way you are behaving and ask if this is the right way to spend your days.

Likutey Etzot 61

- Under what circumstances do you find yourself most likely to live in the “reality of expectations” and when in the present moment?
- Are there triggers for you that bring up expectations for yourself? What do they center around?
- What is the greatest danger of being stuck in the “reality of expectations”?
- Most often regret, sadness, and depression are signs of living in the past while fear, worry, and want are signs of living in the future. What are the signs of living in the present?
- When you are feeling grateful for the present, are you able to stay focused or do the past and future creep into the conversation? Why is it so tough to stay in the present?

Rebbe Nachman encourages us to really take time out to reflect on our lives. While this is an important exercise, there is a concept in Judaism which sharpens the idea further. Hakarat ha tov “recognizing the good,” requires people to see exactly what is in their life at the present moment. Though it sounds simplistic, it can be a difficult task. Like Hanan’s “reality of expectations,” hakarat ha tov requires people to stop looking at what has already happened in their lives and what they hope might occur in the future, and to look only at what is. Incorporating Rebbe Nachman’s directive into this teaching and into your own life allows for reflection, specifically on the things for which you are grateful. It allows you to be connected to the present and ultimately connected to a kind of universal timelessness.

- Would you realistically be able to set aside time each day for hakarat ha tov? What do you set aside time for daily? Why are those things important, and do you think they are as important as gratitude? Do you think Hanan’s father would be able to do this?
- When do you feel most connected to the other people in your life? Why is that feeling important and what does it have to do with being present?
- In response to Rebbe Nachman’s charge, do you feel that the way you have spent your day today was useful? If no, do you honestly believe there is anything you can do to change it? What do you think others would say?
- Can being grateful, even for something small, alter your experience of life? Does that seem too simple and, if so, how can the concept be deepened?
- Thinking back on your life, was there ever something for which you didn’t feel grateful at the time that in hindsight you may see differently now?

③ GRATITUDE AND HUMILITY

After talking to his father about gratitude on both simple and complex levels, Hanan teaches his father that gratitude can also bring about a profound sense of humility. When you realize how much there is to be grateful for, it is impossible not to feel humble. Jewish thought teaches that even when there are elements of your life that are not yet fulfilled, there is still much to be grateful for right now. Some of this inclination is borne from the difficult experiences of the Jewish community throughout history. But some is the acknowledgement that you are no greater than your neighbor. Recognizing this will likely overpower your ego, leaving you with a gentle humility about the reality of your own life.

A teaching from the Talmud highlights the idea of having some control over how we experience the world and our response to it.

What does a good guest say? “How much trouble my host has taken [for me]! How much meat he set before me! How much wine he set before me! How many cakes he has set before me! And all the trouble he has taken was only for my sake!” But what does a bad guest say? “How much, after all, has my host put himself out? I have eaten one piece of bread, I have eaten one slice of meat, I have drunk one cup of wine! All the trouble my host has taken was only for the sake of his wife and his children.

Berachot 58a

- What experiences in your life allow for gratitude and kindness? Do you think you respond to them as often as you would like? The preceding Talmud quote implies that people who are humble in the face of the experiences in their lives are “better” people. Do you agree? Why did the rabbis of the Talmud set up this dichotomy?
- Hanan states that he felt humbled when he was confronted with how little control we actually have in our lives and this led him to be filled with gratitude. What is the connection between gratitude and humility? Is there one? If so, does humility lead to gratitude or is it the other way around?
- How can gratitude and appreciation act as a doorway to actually seeing what you have?
- Do you believe that there are certain things in life that people inherently deserve? What happens if they don’t receive them? Is it possible to live without expecting anything, while still being grateful for what is received?
- Hanan wants his father to be grateful for even the most basic act – breathing. What stops you from being grateful for even basic things like this?
- Is there more power in showing gratitude for the seemingly simple parts of life or the deep and moving experiences in life? Name some examples of each in your life.