



Parshat Toldot
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Gratitude Is Not Just a Feeling
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Jon Levenson, a professor of Bible at Harvard, offers a rich hypothetical that I have shared with you before, and which I share again now because it goes to the heart of the meaning of the holiday of Thanksgiving.

Imagine you are driving to the airport on the Wednesday afternoon before Thanksgiving. It is 4:00, bumper to bumper traffic. You are in the tunnel and, oh no, your car dies. Just dies. You turn on and off the ignition, you pray, you start sweating profusely. People are honking, cursing at you. It is already one of the heaviest traffic days of the year, and now it is even more jammed because your car is stuck. You are stuck. You have no idea what to do. OK, you'll call AAA. You reach for your phone, but it is out of juice, it is one of those days, the honking gets louder and louder. Help!!

Just then, a lovely person knocks on your window. Can I help you? Yes, please! Thank you! Open your hood. I have no idea how to open my hood. He reaches in, pushes the right lever, he opens the hood. He looks at the inner workings of your car and says your battery has died. Do you mind if I give it a jump start? Please. He takes out his cable, he attaches the cable to both cars, and there, in the middle of the tunnel, in the middle of rush hour, he achieves the miracle of *techiyat hametim*, the resurrection of the dead. Your dead car comes roaring back to life. Before speeding off on your merry way, you are effusive: Thank you, thank you, thank you. I am so grateful to you. What is your name, your address, I would like to send you something to show my gratitude.

Oh it was nothing, this seemingly perfect person says. That's why we are here. To help one another. Have a great Thanksgiving!

Off you go, you complete your airport pick-up. That night, you go grocery shopping for the big holiday meal. Whole Foods or Trader Joe's or Star Market, you pick. Your supermarket is super jammed. You have never seen the store so busy. You finish your shopping and take your cart to the checkout counter. The person ahead of you has an enormous cart heaped full of groceries. When the cashier rings up the last item, she gives him the total, that will be 150 dollars. He takes out his wallet, he says I left my credit cards at home, all I have is cash, and I have 130 dollars. She says okay, what would you like to remove? Just then, you see this man who is caught in this jam. He is *the same person* who had just saved you in the tunnel at rush hour.

Here is Jon Levenson's question: if you are a good and decent person, what do you do? The obvious answer is, the only answer is, you help him. You give him \$20 so that he can pay for his groceries and go home. Why is that?

Because gratitude is not just a feeling. Gratitude obligates us to act. The question is not only what are we grateful for? The question is also: *what are we going to do about it?* How do we translate our gratitude into deed?

Jon Levenson taught this hypothetical to make a point about the theology of the Torah. God constantly does favors for the children of Israel. We are not only supposed to thank God, *but to translate our gratitude into deed.* God frees us from Egypt. *So that we can serve God.* God gives us the Torah at Sinai. *So that we can perform the mitzvot of the Torah.* God gives us the land of Israel. *So that we can create a just and ethical society.* It is never just gratitude. It is always gratitude translated into deed.

Which brings us to this lovely weekend. Many families have a tradition of going around the Thanksgiving table and sharing what they are grateful for. That is beautiful. Jon Levenson's Torah would invite us to add an additional dimension, to ask an additional question: *what do we do about the things that we are grateful for?* Allow me to share a story which concretizes what I am talking about, the story of Mary Previte.

Born Mary Taylor in 1932, she was the daughter of Protestant missionaries who did their missionary work in China. She was living in China, she was nine years old, when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor in 1941. The day after Pearl Harbor, Westerners in China were considered by Japan to be enemy aliens. Japanese soldiers went to her school, arrested her and other Western children, and she was stuck in a concentration camp for children *for four years*. American intelligence learned that the Japanese authorities who ran the camp were going to kill all the westerners held there. To save them, on August 17, 1945, a seven-man paratrooper team literally parachuted into the camp and freed Mary and 2,000 fellow prisoners. 13-year old Mary remembers thinking that "They were gorgeous, sun-bronzed American gods" who flew in from the skies and saved them. She was of course grateful. But gratitude is not just an emotion. Gratitude compels action. She did two things *to live her gratitude*.

Starting in 1997, Mary Previte fulfilled a life goal of thanking the soldiers who had saved her life in person, one paratrooper at a time. She started crisscrossing the United States. Two had died, but four were still living, and she flew to thank each of the four of them in person. The seventh person was a Chinese interpreter. It would take her 18 more years to find him. He was then 91 years old. In 2016 she flew to China to thank him in person. *Gratitude is not just an emotion. It is also what you do. We live our gratitude.*

Flying around to thank her saviors was one part of what she did. Here is the other part. The children gathered in that concentration camp were in a dark, hard place. Grateful that she had survived, she wanted to help other children who are gathered in a dark, hard place. So for 30 years, she ran the Camden Country Youth Center in Camden, New Jersey. This was a pretrial juvenile detention center where troubled youth waited for their court cases to proceed. Her goal was to transform this detention center from what she called a “snake pit” to a safe haven, where these young people could learn life skills and character building habits that would allow them to emerge from the criminal justice system to go on to lead decent, productive, peaceful, happy lives.

When Mary Previte died this week, the Governor of New Jersey ordered that flags in New Jersey be flown at half mast. She lived her gratitude and in doing so touched many lives over many years.

What about us? Are we not only *feeling* gratitude, but also *living* the gratitude we feel?

Thanksgiving invites us to think about what do we do for the people to whom we are grateful. You are grateful to your parents for loving you and always being there for you. *What do you do?* You are grateful to your siblings for knowing and loving you your whole life. *What do you do?* You are grateful to your spouse for the love and companionship that imbues your days with the deepest joy. *What do you do?* You are grateful to your children and grandchildren for growing up to be wonderful adults. *What do you do?*

Long after Thanksgiving is over, long after that last airport run, long after that last load of laundry is done, long after that last leftover is eaten, the spiritual homework of this holiday endures: take the gratitude we feel, live it out, and translate it into deed. Shabbat shalom.