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Temple Emanuel
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Rebooting Resolutions

Last month I was in Tel Aviv and I came across a catchy phrase that was written on a blackboard at a restaurant - of all places. I googled the phrase and learned that it was coined not by an Israeli but by an American -a motivational speaker named Michael Altshuler. The phrase read as follows:

The bad news is that time flies, the good news is that you're the pilot!

This phrase came to mind as I considered what I wanted to share with you this morning. I thought to myself: it's almost 2019 - time does fly. And while we already "did" resolutions back in September, the start of the secular year gives us an opportunity to re-boot. And this phrase -about us being the "pilot," pretty much summarizes the framework in which we made these resolutions:

It's up to *us* to travel in the direction of our best selves.

The road is unpredictable and we shouldn't delay.

There will be unexpected bumps along the way.

And *where* we go and *how* we respond is for us to decide.

We're the pilot!

And just by chance, on this Shabbat - the last of 2018, our Torah reading reminded us of this message of "agency" and "urgency." It's really quite the coincidence that as we begin 2019, we also begin the book of Exodus - the book that marks our journey from slavery to liberation; from Egypt to the promised land. As you know, in our tradition *mitzrayim* - or Egypt, refers not only to the great power that enslaved the Israelites but also to the psychological forces that enslave us. We recall this story everyday as part of our liturgy in an effort to internalize it's message: that radical change is indeed possible - both in ourselves and the world at large.

It's just the story we need to hear as we welcome 2019 -as we revisit the commitments and resolutions we made a few months ago. But not only because this story carries a message of hope and change but because it's rooted in an equally radical journey towards dependence and gratitude. This *other* journey -towards acknowledging dependence and cultivating gratitude, gets much less "air time" but it's the journey that I'd like to highlight this morning.

I'll start with the two principal characters in our narrative, Moses and Pharaoh, models of gratitude and ingratitude, respectively. When, for example, the Torah says that "Pharaoh didn't know Joseph"- what it really means to say, according to the rabbis, is that Pharaoh didn't acknowledge the great debt he owed Joseph for saving the people from starvation. Pharaoh is incapable of acknowledging anyone or anything beyond himself: not Joseph, not even God. Pharaoh shows us that being ungrateful means worshipping only oneself.

Moses is the exact opposite. Various midrashim point to the gratitude that book-ends his mission to free the Israelites - his gratitude towards the Midianites and to Jethro in particular, who welcomed him when he fled Egypt. The moment the rabbis highlight comes right after the encounter at the burning bush. Moses's response to this encounter is a bit surprising. He goes straight to Jethro, his father-in-law, who has "been there" for him all along. Moses wants to ensure that Jethro is on board with this mission. And forty years later, when God instructs Moses to take revenge on the Midianites, Moses remembers - says the midrash, what he owes them and stays back. Moses is modeling for the Israelites a radically different way of being. And they sure need it given how much they complain during the wilderness years. Gratitude is far from their strong suit!

But the thing is this: it's not that we have two parallel themes in our master narrative - one, a journey towards liberation and the other, a journey towards gratitude. These two themes are very much intertwined. Because what makes oppression possible is a culture, a mindset, that refuses to truly *see* others and to acknowledge our dependence on them. Ingratitude blinds us to the reality and dignity of other people. Rabbi Shai Held, to whom I am indebted for his thoughtful essay on this theme, explains it beautifully when he says:

"Ingratitude constitutes a kind of prison. When we refuse to be grateful we close ourselves off from the possibility of real relationship and connection to others. To be ungrateful is to be shackled in a prison of our own making; it's like living in a form of solitary confinement. However, in allowing ourselves to be grateful we free ourselves from the prison of our own self-enclosure and become available to meet and be met by others." (*The Heart of Torah*, Shai Held)

In reading his words, what came to mind was the movie *Roma* which I recently saw; a movie that is getting a lot of attention as an early frontrunner for best picture. *Roma* is set in the 70's in Mexico City and to a large extent it explores just this idea -that ingratitude blinds us from truly seeing others. The main character is a young nanny from the countryside who gives of herself in small and big ways to the family she works for, especially the children. She gently wakes them up in the early morning and gets them ready for school, she feeds them dinner and sweetly tucks them in at night. In between she picks up for all of them, including the dog. But in many ways she is invisible to the family, especially the Mom -*until* the day she risks her life to save one of the children. It's a picture - both literally and figuratively, of ingratitude at the extreme.

I wonder how our own lives would change if we brought into sharper focus the ways in which family, friends, colleagues, caregivers have "been there" for us. How paying attention to even the small ways in which we've relied on others can help us mend and deepen relationships. The challenge, however, is that opening ourselves up to gratitude isn't easy:

It's hard to look beyond the brokenness in our lives; to look beyond the pain we face.

It's hard to appreciate the partial successes in our lives; to celebrate the small steps along the way.

Our tradition doesn't shy away from these challenges. In fact, it confronts them head on.

Every year, for example, when we re-tell our master narrative around the Passover table and sing *Dayeinu*, we are doing just that: celebrating the partial, the incomplete. Most of us join in with great enthusiasm when we finally get to *Dayeinu*. "Enough will all the recounting," some might say, "let's eat!" Of course, that's not what the song is all about. What we're really saying is that we're grateful for each and every step along the way, even when we're not there yet. *Dayenu* means that we should take a moment to appreciate each step *as if* it were enough. It's about feeling the fullness of the incomplete and pushing on....

Around my Passover table I always turn to my mother to lead us in singing *Dayeinu*; not because she has a beautiful voice, she would be the first to admit that she doesn't, but because *Dayeinu* is truly her perspective on life. And she has fiercely held on to this perspective even after my father passed away this July. My parents would have celebrated their 67th wedding anniversary next week. My mother, however, doesn't dwell on the extra years they might have enjoyed together; she pushes on with gratitude in her heart for the years they *did* have.

Since my father died, I've been going to morning minyan at our shul. There is a beautiful tradition at the minyan that when the period of mourning ends, the mourner shares a few words about the person for whom they've been saying kaddish. A few months ago, a congregant spoke about her beloved husband; about how he devoted his professional life to helping others and the ways in which he extended himself to family and friends. And then, she spoke about his deep attachment to the gratitude blessing in the Amidah; the blessing that says *Modim anachnu lach*. I was deeply moved by the fact that someone who *gave* so much was so eager to *give* thanks.

And as she spoke, I thought about the midrash that says that in the future all prayers will be annulled, except for the prayer of gratitude. I suspect the reason is because gratitude doesn't come easily to us; it needs to be nurtured. In fact, the Torah warns against forgetting to express gratitude when things are going well; against thinking that it's all thanks to our own efforts.

If it's hard to express gratitude when all is going well, how is it even possible when things are difficult? The rabbis of the Talmud offer us a powerful story that speaks to this. It comes in response to the question (Brachot 7b): "who is the first person in the world to express gratitude to God?" The answer they give is not what we might expect. According to the rabbis, the first person to express gratitude was Leah. Their answer is surprising since we know from Torah that she is profoundly sad. Jacob, her husband, barely notices her. It's Rachel, the younger sister and the second wife, that he loves. You might remember that Jacob is tricked into marrying Leah and despite the three sons that she gives him, Leah remains unloved.

But when Leah gives birth to her fourth son something happens. Her mindset shifts and all of a sudden she is able to see the fullness of what she *has* rather than her disappointments. We know that this shift takes place because of the name she gives this fourth child. Her three other sons carried names that expressed the deep sadness of being unloved but when her fourth son is born she calls him *Yehudah* or Judah which means: "I will praise God." Her disappointment is real but she allows gratitude to take root in her heart. The Talmud tells us that it's *because* Leah discovers the capacity to feel gratitude amidst sorrow that she merits being called the first person ever to express gratitude to God. And from *Yehuda* we get our name, *Yehudim*. One might say that a Jew is a person who -like Leah, can express gratitude even when our dreams aren't fully realized.

You're probably wondering, however: what about our other name, Israel or *Yisrael*? This is the name Jacob receives after wrestling all night with the angel of God. *Yisrael* means to struggle, to challenge God. And so, while one of our names, *Yehuda*, is rooted in acceptance and gratitude, the other, *Yisrael*, is all about struggle and change. Our two names, much like our master narrative, reflect this dual identity that our tradition asks us to embrace.

It's almost 2019. As we revisit the resolutions we made back in September, what would it mean to infuse them with a mindset of *both* radical change *and* radical gratitude? What would it mean to do this in our personal lives as well as in our approach to the world at large -which sorely needs our help?

Because, the thing is this: when we can shine a light on what we are grateful for, we are that much better equipped to work towards change. Gratitude re-energizes us and helps us move forward.

Yes, the bad news is that time flies.

The good news is that it's up to us to take in the blessings in our lives, to celebrate the incremental steps along the way and to travel forward with agency and urgency in our hearts.

Shabbat shalom.