

Our parashah begins with the word עִקֵּב (*eichev*), which in this context means in consequence of/because. The root עקב builds words for heel, footprint, circumvent, follow at the heel, overreach, steep (difficult mountain path), supplant, and devious. Well-chosen word indeed, from a man who for nearly 40 years has tried valiantly to lead this unruly, often obliviously ungrateful multitude as it lurches from slavery to autonomy. Although these concepts contain tools for success, they carry dire consequences if taken to excess. Jakob, named for the heel of his twin brother Esau, which he emerged from the womb grasping, was the trickster who first had to suffer mightily at the hands of his equally devious uncle Laban before he was finally mature enough to understand his mission and earn his new name in that nocturnal wrestling match: *Yisra-el* – one who strives with HaShem and with humans. Rabbi Arthur Waskow calls us “God-Wrestlers” – an apt name for a people engaged in an ongoing effort to define and develop both our institutional and our personal relationship with HaShem. We struggle with Torah and halacha, with discerning right from wrong, and with understanding and reconciling the human and divine within ourselves as the experiences of life change us. Like our ancestors with one foot back in the desert and one foot set in the direction of the Promised Land, we often stumble, usually because we are too preoccupied with the minutiae of life to stop, look around us, and just be grateful. Moses sets forth his steady stream of warnings, juxtaposing positive and negative consequences, and imploring the people to never forget from whence they came and how they have managed to reach this juncture. “But you must remember the Lord your God, for it is He that gives you strength to make wealth ...” (8:18) Paradoxically, success often creates greed, dulling our senses as we chase after the “false gods” of our desires. “And it will be, if you forget the Lord your God and follow other gods, ..., I bear witness against you this day, that you will surely perish.” (8:19) Recent studies have revealed that although there are certain genetic propensities for gratitude, gratitude can – and for our own well-being, must – be learned. There are unsatisfied people of considerable means who constantly want more; and there are happy people of modest means who are profoundly grateful for what they have. “[Ben Zoma would say] Who is rich? One who is happy with his lot. ...” (Pirke Avot 4:1) Materialism, envy, narcissism, cynicism, and fear override gratitude, leaving emptiness and dissatisfaction in their wake. Of them all, fear heads the list, not only because it is so powerful that it obliterates all other emotions, but also because it usually underlies the other traits. In their 40-year sojourn our ancestors experience the entire spectrum of negative behaviors and their tragic consequences, usually because they are too rooted in fear to feel gratitude. The *mishkan* and the Temples with their elaborate construction and sacrificial rituals were intended to engender gratitude, but as the prophets drive home to us centuries later, all of the outward trappings are meaningless without positive behavior generated in grateful hearts. Now, our prayers, which have replaced the ancient sacrifices, both teach and express gratitude. We have blessings for everything: food, beverage, fragrance, good and bad news, natural phenomena, seeing great scholars or “unusual” people, going to bed and awakening, going on a journey and returning, performing commandments, donning new clothes, taking challah, and even for relieving ourselves. In Mishneh Torah, Laws of Prayer 1:2, Maimonides teaches: “Hence, women and slaves are under an obligation to pray ... every person should daily, according to his ability, offer up supplication and prayers; first uttering praises of God, then, with humble supplication and petition ask for all that he needs, and finally offer praise and thanksgiving to the Eternal for the benefits already bestowed upon him in rich measure.” He continues by discussing how this is reflected in our *Amidah*: “The first three blessings consist of praises of God and the last three of thanksgiving to Him. The intermediate benedictions are petitions for the things which may stand as categories of all the desires of the individual and the needs of the community. ...” The first prayer we utter upon awakening thanks HaShem for restoring our soul, and as we drift into sleep we proclaim HaShem’s greatness. Our TaNaKh offers many powerful examples of gratitude: the Song of the Sea as our ancestors were rescued from the Egyptians, Devorah’s song after the defeat of Sisera, Hannah’s song after giving birth to Samuel, David’s gratitude upon being delivered from his enemies, the Book of Psalms. And in our parashah Moses gives us the basis for the *birkat hamazon*, our table grace. “And you will eat and be sated, and you shall bless the Lord, your God, for the good land He has given you.” (8:10). We cannot live without food, and in order to produce food, we need healthy land. As Moses and the prophets continually remind us, we reap what we sow. “... man does not live by bread alone, but rather, by whatever comes forth from the mouth of the Lord.” (8:3) Gratitude is the antidote to hubris because it entails not only realizing that what we have is never solely the work of our own hands, but also, accepting the responsibility of using our resources wisely to ensure that HaShem’s creation will continue to provide for the generations to come. There are countless reasons to be grateful, and we can find more every day.

Shabbat shalom!

