

"It Is Good To Give Thanks"
 Sermon for Ong Beach Interfaith Thanksgiving Celebration
 11/22/04

תהלים צב:ב
 טוֹב לְהַדוֹת לַד' וּלְזַמֵּר לְשִׁמְךָ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ

It is good to give thanks to the Lord, and to sing to your name, Oh most high.

Psalms 92:2

The words of Psalm 92 are simple enough. It is good to give thanks to God. It is God who put us on this Earth, God who has sustained us, and has given us the ability to help sustain ourselves.

In life, our obligation to give thanks goes beyond God. For there are so many people who help us through life, and also deserve our thanks. Thanking a friend who helped us in a time of need, thanking a loved one for their support, or thanking colleagues for bringing together this assembly of the faithful.

In fact, rabbinic lore says that the mindset of thankfulness is so important that we must be thankful even towards inanimate objects as well. When it came time for the first plague, God instructed Moses to have Aaron strike the water with Aaron's rod (Ex. 7:19). According to rabbinic legend, God tells Moses to do this since water had saved Moses when he was put into the river in a tiny basket many years before. God felt that Moses owed a duty of gratitude to the water, and thus felt it more appropriate for Aaron to initiate this first plague (see commentary of Rashi *ad. loc.*).

But why is being thankful so important? What use does God have for our thanks? Does the Omnipresent and Omnipotent really need words of thanks from mere mortals? From those who were created out of a clump of dirt?

And what about our friends? What is our motivation to thank them? Do we suspect that our friends only help us because we thank them and praise them? Is not the good deed enough reward? Do we want our friends to think that they should only do good things if they are going to be thanked for it? Why give thanks? Why show appreciation?

And inanimate objects? Why should we be thankful towards mere molecules of water?

I am sure there are many answers to this question. Many benefits to being thankful. I would like to focus on one of those reasons. In Hebrew, we refer to the *mitsvah*, good deed, of giving thanks as הכרת הטוב (*hakkarat hatov*), which means "recognizing the good." So, the act of giving thanks helps recognize those things that are truly טוב (*tov*), good, in our lives. And indeed, as Psalm 136 says (v. 1, also 1 Chronicles 16:34) הודו לַד' כִּי טוֹב "Give thanks to the Lord, for it is טוב, good." Giving praise and thanks is how we recognize the things that are good in our lives.

Across so many cultures, there is "The Golden Rule." It found a voice in Leviticus as וְאַהֲבַת לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ *love your neighbor as yourself*. (19:18) The Jewish sage Hillel said "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor: that is the whole *Torah* (Bible)" (Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 31a). Similarly, Hinduism teaches "One should not behave towards others in a way which is

disagreeable to oneself. This is the essence of morality." (Mahabharata, Anusasana Parva 113.8); and a Buddhist scripture reads "For a state that is not pleasant or delightful to me must also be to him also; and a state that is not pleasing or delightful to me, how could I inflict that upon another?" (Samyutta Nikaya v.353) Luke 6:31 reads "Do unto others as you would have them do to you." (6:31) In Islam, an-Nawawi said "Not one of you is a believer until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself." (40 Hadith of an-Nawawi 13). In Analects 15:23 we are told that Confucius was asked (by Tsekung) "Is there one word that can serve as a principle of conduct for life?" Confucius replied, "It is the word shu--reciprocity: Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you.' In Jainism it is taught "A man should wander about treating all creatures as he himself would be treated." (Jainism. Sutrakritanga 1.11.33) [Writer's note: I got most of these quotes from <http://www.unification.net/ws/theme015.htm>].

What all these statements assume, is that we already know what is good. We already know how we like to be treated. Because if we haven't spent enough time identifying how we would like to be treated, how could we possibly expect to know how to treat those around us.

If we are to succeed in fulfilling that Golden Rule, we must start by understanding ourselves better. By better appreciating what is agreeable to us. We must savor the benevolence bestowed on us by others, and in turn to relish the opportunity to show the same kindness to those around us.

In this Thanksgiving season, may we all merit a spirit of true *הכרת הטוב* (*hakkarat hatov*), true thanksgiving. A season where we recognize the good in life - the good bestowed on us every day by the Almighty, by our friends, and by those around us. May we learn from that good, and may we have a part in bestowing that good on others. Amen.