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Holding Both Gratitude and Grief: A Jewish Reflection

By Bassie Taubes

One of my favorite mindfulness mantras, one I use personally and often share with my students, is simple yet powerful: take a deep breath in and fill your body with air and a sense of gratitude. Recall one event, person or idea that you are thankful for and hold that feeling at the top of your breath. Then, as you exhale, release a negative thought. This practice, though only a few seconds long, can help calm the mind, nourish the soul and promote an overall sense of well-being.

The benefits of expressing gratitude are more than just anecdotal. Studies have shown that regularly feeling and verbalizing gratitude can serve as a psychological buffer against stress and trauma, even in the midst of grief and hardship. Gratitude doesn't erase pain, but it helps us reframe our overall experience and regain perspective. Much like mindfulness, it has become a widely embraced practice in modern life—popular, yes, but often difficult to access when we are truly hurting.

Judaism offers a deep and nuanced framework for cultivating gratitude. The first two words uttered out of our mouth each morning, Modeh Ani, are words of thanks. We thank God for every bodily function and every morsel of food or liquid that enters our body. Showing gratitude is the primary reason for berachot. We are commanded to rejoice during the Shalosh Regalim—the three pilgrimage festivals of Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot—yet towards the end of those very occasions of celebration, we recite Yizkor, remembering loved ones who are no longer with us. We sing Hallel, a song of praise, and shortly thereafter may find ourselves weeping. This complexity is not a contradiction; it is an essential part of Jewish spiritual life.

The ability to hold both joy and sorrow is deeply embedded in the Jewish experience. Our history is one of resilience, where happiness and heartache have always walked side by side. We sing and dance on Simchat Torah, even as we now carry the unbearable weight of Oct. 7, 2023, a day of tragedy, murder and terror, forever etched into our collective memory. Simchat Torah will never be the same, and yet we will continue to sing and dance, because that, too, is who we are.

This spiritual and emotional duality is a constant theme in Jewish life. Every year on TishaB'Av we commemorate the destruction of both the First and Second Temple. These are events we never personally experienced, and yet through halacha and ritual, we are directed to feel the Temples' absence. In the three weeks leading up to Tisha B'Av, we refrain from music, weddings, haircuts and new clothing. In the final nine days, we abstain from eating meat and drinking wine. On Tisha B'Av itself, we sit on the floor, fast, and read Eicha by a dim light. We create an atmosphere of mourning to help us access loss as a lived experience. In the afternoon, however, we get off the floor, and some have the practice to tidy the house in anticipation of Moshiach's arrival. And just a few days later, comforted and content, we observe Shabbat Nachamu and the joyous day of Tu B'Av - the 15th of Av.

Perhaps nowhere is this interweaving of joy and sorrow more profound than at a wedding. At the peak of personal and public celebration, beneath the chuppah, we pause to remember the destruction of the Temple. It has now become popular at this time to sing the verse: *"Im eshkachech Yerushalayim, tishkach yemini"*, "If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill." In our happiest moment, we invite grief in. The groom breaks a glass, and then we dance and rejoice with abandonment. Once again, we are asked to hold great sorrow and deep joy at the same time.

Until recently, I never truly understood the words, "If I forget you...let my right hand forget its skill." But this past May, my nephew Eyal (about whom I have written previously) was shot by a sniper in Gaza. His left arm, below the elbow, was blown off. Since then, I think of him every time I clap. With courage and determination, Eyal is learning to use the muscles in his shoulder to operate a prosthetic device. It's grueling work, but he pushes forward. The small, unconscious act of clapping, something so ordinary, something we all take for granted, has now taken on a profound and painful meaning for me. I realize that just as we should not take our hand for granted, we should not take Jerusalem—or the land of Israel—for granted.

This Tisha B'Av, we find ourselves as a people suspended between miracles and mourning. We feel profound gratitude for every missile that missed, for every hostage who returned, for the intelligence that thwarted terror, and for the bravery of our chayalim. At the same time, we are shattered by the lives lost, the wounded—both physically and emotionally—the hostages still in captivity, and the rise of antisemitism across the globe.

And yet, we know this terrain. Our tradition teaches us that gratitude and sorrow can live side by side, in our hearts, in our heads and in our souls.

Wishing you a meaningful and easy fast. May this year bring us more reasons to feel gratitude, and may we continue to hold all of it with our strength and breath.

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