

THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

BY RABBI DR. TZVI HERSH WEINREB
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"The Thankful Jew"

He may or may not have been an anti-Semite, but he sure was an abrasive personality. He was my seat mate on an Amtrak train, returning to Baltimore from New York some years ago.

As I recall, it was at the end of a particularly long and grueling day for me. I had a series of rabbinical meetings, delivered a talk during lunch which provided me no opportunity to eat, and was involved in an unsuccessful attempt to keep the marriage of a young couple from breaking up. I was looking forward to the respite of some quiet time on the return trip to my home in Baltimore, but even that luxury was denied to me that evening.

I sat down, as I always try to do, in the window seat. This fellow entered the railroad car and walked past me in search of a seat for himself. There were several seats that he could have chosen, but for some reason he returned to where I was sitting, glared at me, and sat down with a gesture of dissatisfaction.

I immediately sensed that I would not experience the peaceful train ride that I had anticipated. I tried burying my head in the book I was reading, but that was not sufficient insulation from my neighbor's insistence upon conversation.

"You are obviously Jewish," he began. "Your yarmulke, for one thing, is a dead giveaway. Plus, I see that you are reading a Hebrew book."

Of course, I admitted to being Jewish and slanted my book in his direction so that he could verify that it was indeed in Hebrew. I asked him, as I typically do in such conversations, whether he was Jewish.

I can only describe his instant response by saying that he snorted. "Look, buddy," he growled. "I've got my bunch of problems and burdens, but being Jewish is thankfully not one of them."

I was at a loss as to what to say next, but there was something about his use of the word "thankfully" that prompted me to comment to him: "But surely you have other things to be thankful for besides not being Jewish."

He seemed to be taken aback, having expected some defensive statement on my part, or perhaps some indication that I was offended. I was hoping that I succeeded at changing the topic from my Jewishness to his life and the things he had to be thankful for.

May the Torah learned from this issue be dedicated l'iluy nishmat our beloved father, grandfather, and great-grandfather

Pinchas Eedel ben Moshe z"l
פנחס אידל בן משה ז"ל
on his 10th Yahrtzeit כסלו ז'

He continues to be missed!

It worked. That is, at least for a while. He went on to say that he didn't have much to be thankful for, although he was happily married, had several children, and held a well-paying job. He also insisted that these beneficial facets of his life were merely the result of good fortune and did not call for any expression of thanks on his part.

He then pressed on with his almost obsessive interest in my Jewishness. "You seem to be proud of the fact that you are a Jew. Why? What is it about you Jews that makes you want to wear your Jewishness on the outside? Why do you dress so differently, and why you persist in reading those old-fashioned books in that outdated language?"

I was about to launch into a major lecture but restrained myself from doing so, knowing full well that my efforts would be in vain. As I hesitated, pondering my next move, he surprised me.

"Forget those questions," he said. "Instead, give me an answer to the following question. It is one that I've asked many Jews before, but none were able to give me a satisfactory answer. My question is: What does the word 'Jew' mean? What is its origin, and what is its significance?"

Once again, the word "thankful" proved useful. I responded that the word "Jew" in English is related to the word "Jude" in German, which in turn derives from the Hebrew word "Judah," one of the ancestors of the Jewish people.

I then asked him whether or not he was familiar with the Bible, particularly the Old Testament. His face, which up until this point projected hostility, suddenly took on a different aspect. His facial muscles seemed to relax at first, and then his eyes clouded over with tears.

"Are you kidding? I was the child of a preacher whose father was a preacher before him. We read from the Bible at the dinner table and studied it regularly every single day. I grew up resenting the Bible and all that it stood for, although I remember much of it against my will. I guess one can't forget words that were ingrained in him since his childhood."

I now had my opening. And this is the connection to this week's Torah reading, *Parshat Vayetze* (*Genesis* 28:10-32:3). "Then you must remember the stories of *Genesis*. Do you recall the passage in which Leah names her children? Do you remember the name she gave to her fourth son?"

The words came out of his mouth as they would from a recording: "*Genesis* 30:35: And she conceived again and bore a son, and said, 'This time I will praise the Lord.' Therefore she called his name Judah. Then she ceased bearing."

He looked at me with a big grin, his face finally indicating a small measure of friendship. "Impressive, wouldn't you say? I remember every word. I even remember Grandpa explaining that 'Judah' sounds like the Hebrew for 'praise.'"

I responded by congratulating him for his excellent memory and further remarked that he had his old Grandpa to thank for his biblical expertise. I indicated

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that Leah's reaction to her fourth child's birth was usually translated in our tradition as, "This time I will *thank* the Lord".

"Now you have your answer. We are called Jews because of our ancestor, Judah, whose very name means to praise, or to thank. By definition, the Jew is a person who feels thankful, who expresses gratitude for all his blessings to the Almighty, who provides those blessings to other humans without whose help those blessings would never be realized."

He didn't seem convinced. "Why then," he pressed on, "is it so hard to feel thankful and ever so much more difficult to express it?"

I told them that to answer that question, I would have to give him a further lesson in the Hebrew language. I explained to him that the word *hoda'ah*, while it is the Hebrew word for thanks, it is also the Hebrew word for admission or confession. I went on to explain something to him that I had learned in the writings of Rabbi Isaac Hutner, who taught that when we are thankful to another person, we are in effect admitting that we couldn't do it alone but were dependent upon the other person for the favor.

Gratitude to God entails the recognition of one's own insufficiency and the confession that without God, we would not have achieved that which we are grateful for.

"It is difficult to be thankful," I concluded, "because it is difficult to admit to ourselves that alone we are inadequate and must always rely upon the Divine or the human to achieve whatever we wish to achieve in life. We don't like to admit that we need another, that we can't 'go at it alone.' "

At that point, the train was fast approaching Wilmington, Delaware. My companion was about to get off. He didn't say goodbye and certainly did not thank me for my words.

But he did give me a small bit of satisfaction. He said: "You're different from other Jews. You actually make sense."

I spent the rest of the train ride pondering the adequacy of my responses to this stranger and feeling thankful to the Almighty for giving me the words I needed to earn this dubious compliment. ■

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