

Gratitude for the State of Israel

I love this country because it also makes me angry. The government drives me crazy, income taxes are way too high, reserve duty is a pain in the butt, and the way people drive is horrible. Every time there are elections, half the country threatens to leave and the other half is insulted. The culture of debate here is anything but cultured... We suffer from too much weight, too much bureaucracy, and too many taxi drivers giving too little change. The right is aggressive, the left is impotent, and the Knesset is rated R. But it is clear to me notwithstanding that I am angry because I care. We are the most heterogeneous country in the West. Everyone feels like he owns a share of this country. In Switzerland, no one is angry at their country; it is not that important to them.

- from "The Land I Love,"
Yair Lapid, © Ma'ariv 2002

Appreciating What We Have

I have a close friend named Jim Forest... Jim and I...sat under a tree and shared a tangerine. He began to talk about what we would be doing in the future. Whenever we thought about a project that seemed attractive or inspiring, Jim became so immersed in it that he literally forgot about what he was doing in the present. He popped a section of tangerine in his mouth and, before he had begun chewing it, had another slice ready to pop into his mouth again. He was hardly aware he was eating a tangerine. All I had to say was, "You ought to eat the tangerine section you've already taken." Jim was startled into realizing what he was doing. It was as if he hadn't been eating the tangerine at all. If he had been eating anything, he was "eating" his future plans.

- The Mirade of Mindfulness, Thich Nhat Hanh, p. 5

Dayenu – דיינו

כַּמָּה מַעֲלֹת טוֹבוֹת לְמָקוֹם עָלֵינוּ:
אֱלֹהֵי הַדְּבָרֵינוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם וְלֹא עָשָׂה בָּהֶם שְׁפָטִים, דֵּיִינוּ...
אֱלֹהֵי קָרַע לָנוּ אֶת הַיָּם וְלֹא הִעֲבִירָנוּ בְּתוֹכוֹ בְּהַרְבֵּה,
דֵּיִינוּ...
אֱלֹהֵי נָתַן לָנוּ אֶת הַתּוֹרָה וְלֹא הִכְנִיסָנוּ לְאֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל,
דֵּיִינוּ...

How many levels of goodness the All-Present places on us:

Had He brought us out from Egypt, and not carried out judgments against them – Dayenu!...

Had He split the sea for us, and not taken us through it on dry land – Dayenu!...

Had He given us the Torah, and not brought us into the Land of Israel – Dayenu!...

- *the Passover Haggadah*

Gratitude and Giving

The quality of giving inheres only in the person who is happy – not just satisfied – with his lot. He is happy because his life is filled with the joys of spiritual pursuits, before whose riches all other interests pale into petty insignificance. In his happiness he resembles a river in flood whose life-giving waters overflow all its banks. We have already seen how the heart of one in a state of joy broadens to encompass all who are close to him; the more joyful the person the greater his desire that all his friends take part in his joy. So it is with the giver. Firmly rooted in the spiritual life, his eyes ever turned towards its heights, he sees in everything, great and small, "the kindnesses of God which are unending and His mercies which have no limit." Consequently his joy in these gifts knows no bounds and his life is unendingly happy. Out of this fullness of joy and happiness flow giving and love.

- from Strive for Truth,
Rav Eliyahu Dessler

The Challenge of Receiving

Under what circumstances do we normally keep pleading, "Enough"? Not just when we don't deserve something, but when we don't really want it. It is as if every time God moved us closer to our fate, we pleaded, "Enough already! Please, God, no more."

Dayenu should be read alongside the well-known midrashim that emphasize how little Israel wanted the responsibility of being a chosen people. According to one, God offered the Torah to other nations at the time, who refused it altogether. In another midrash, we agree to shoulder its burden only after God lifts Mount Sinai over our heads and threatens us with extinction if we refuse to accept it.

Looking back now, we might admit we had good reason to be wary. Given the task of Torah and the history of being Jewish, we can well imagine our ancestors pleading, "Enough already," all along the way. Who needs being chosen? Every single redemptive step implies further obligation. Wouldn't just a little obligation have been enough?

- from "Dayenu?" Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, © New Jersey Jewish News 2003

Introduction and Commentary

At Nesiya we educate toward giving. The mirror side of giving is the ability to receive, and to express gratitude.

Receiving and gratitude are not always easy for us – neither as Jews, nor as human beings. Many of us are so focused on the anticipation of our future that we fail to recognize the power and significance of every moment. Sometimes our perfectionist side takes over, and all we see are the flaws and missing pieces in the people around us and in what we do – even in those things and people we love. We may never get to enjoy feeling grateful because we don't want to feel needy or weak – because in order to really receive something, we first have to acknowledge that we can't acquire it for ourselves. In our fear of being obligated or dependent, we lose the opportunity to be taken care of.

Dayenu is about giving, receiving, and expressing gratitude. Instead of summing up our exodus from Egypt in one sentence, the poem divides it into fifteen discrete steps. Traditional commentaries wonder how we can say "it would have been enough" if God had split the sea for us, but not taken us across to the other side. In what sense would that have been "enough"? Our answer focuses on the psychological message of the poem. The division of the poem into stages asks us to reflect on each stage of the process, challenging us to be grateful for every step even while knowing that the process is not complete. It is not only about crossing the finish line. We need to appreciate and enjoy every level that we reach.

Our relationship to the modern State of Israel raises some of these questions. With all the persistent problems Israel faces, internally and externally, how can we see it as a place of inspiration and joy? Dayenu teaches us that we can fully appreciate the wonder of having a modern Jewish state while not denying the difficulties, the pain, and how much has not yet been achieved.

On a personal level, Dayenu urges us to express our appreciation for the unique gifts that our friends and family have given us. We not only recognize what we have received, but we communicate that recognition fully. Ultimately, feeling real gratitude fills us with the desire and ability to give. Our appreciation of all that God has done for us inspires us to emulate His generosity and caring. Similarly, our recognition of what we have received from others will not make us feel weak and needy, but will rather empower us to become joyful givers ourselves.

Making it Relevant

Create Your Own *Dayenu*

If you were to write your own Dayenu, what "dayenus" would you include? What you would put in:

- a "dayenu" for yourself?
- a "dayenu" for your family?
- a "dayenu" for the Jewish people?

Getting Down to Specifics

Express gratitude to someone sitting at the table for something specific that they have done or that you have received from them.

Educating for Gratitude

So far we have talked about feeling grateful to others. What about when someone is grateful to you for something you have done? What does it feel like? Share one experience of someone being grateful to you. What does it feel like when someone is too grateful? When someone is not grateful enough?

What would you do if you were to meet someone who wasn't grateful? How would you go about educating them to be grateful?