

**Rosh Hashanah
5776/2015
Rabbi Alan B. Lucas
“Aggressive Gratitude”**

Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheynu Melech Haolom Hagomel L'chayavim tovot – she-g'malani kol tuv

“Praised are you Adonai our God, who rules the universe showing goodness to us beyond our merits and has treated me so favorably.”

This is the *bracha* recited by one who has recovered from a serious illness or survived a life-threatening crisis. In our community, this prayer is usually recited by people who have survived car accidents, who have completed a regimen of chemotherapy or radiation or who have had other kinds of brushes with danger.

It is the one I recited on this bema a few weeks ago, the first time I was back at shul following my open-heart surgery this summer. Saying *Birkat HaGomel* almost always means that something terrible happened to you or almost happened to you.

You may remember one of the most memorable times that we recited this prayer, it was right after 9/11. That Rosh Hashanah, 14 years ago was merely a week after the horror of 9/11, I invited anyone who had been anywhere near the Twin Towers to come to the bema and *Bentsch Gomel*. You may remember that so many came up - our bema was filled – it was an unexpected and a memorable moment.

It has also become our custom to take time right after the Torah reading on Yom Kippur to invite all those who were ill, in the hospital, or suffered an accident during the past year to stand and join in this prayer of thanksgiving.

And the more I thought about it, the more I realized it is a strange prayer and a peculiar time to say a prayer of thanksgiving. Most of us think of gratitude as something we express when *good* things happens to us. Averting near disaster is not what we normally consider a “good thing.” Winning the lottery is a “good thing.” A surprise diamond bracelet on your birthday is a “good thing.” Not dying on the operating table? I would have been much more grateful had I not been on that operating table to begin with.

But we Jews have a unique way of looking at life and living. We Jews adopt a posture of “aggressive gratitude” as our response to EVERYTHING that happens to us.

This is expressly stated in the *Mishna* – one of the earliest compendia of Jewish Law, when it says that we are obligated to bless God for the bad just as we bless God for the good in our lives. According to the *Mishna* in *Berachot* 9:5 – when something good happens in our lives – the appropriate *bracha* is: *Baruch Atah Adonai HaTov V'Hamaytiv* – “Praise are You God who is Good and causes Good to happen.” When something bad happens to us the *bracha* to be recited is *Baruch Atah Adonai Dayan HaEmet* – “Praised our You God who is a Righteous Judge.” Some of you may remember this as the blessing we recited at the bedside of a loved one who has just died, and when we tear *kriah* at the funeral. *Dayan HaEmet* is a very different kind of *bracha* from *HaTov V'Mamaytiv*. When good things happen to us we are called

upon to acknowledge God's goodness. When bad things happen we are called upon to accept God's judgment. We don't have to understand the Judge's ruling. We certainly don't have to like it, but we do have to accept it. They are very different blessings, *Ho Tov V'Hamaytiv* and *Dayan Emet* – but they are both blessings and we are commanded to accept the blessings precipitating occurrences, good and bad, with equanimity.

What wisdom is concentrated in our sacred tradition? When tragedy strikes the danger is that we will enter a state of denial – “This can't be happening, this certainly can't be happening to *me!*” So we are called upon to recite a *bracha* acknowledging the new reality that is now ours. And when good things happen – the danger... well what exactly is the danger that confronts us when we are blessed with good fortune?

I have come to believe that the opposite of gratitude is not ingratitude but entitlement. You see, when we feel entitled to something, we are unlikely to express gratitude for it because, well because we expect it.

A friend gives your child or grandchild a lollipop: “Say thank you” – we try and teach our little ones – and their quizzical, non-comprehending look makes my case. Gratitude is a learned response. Children inherently don't understand why they should say thank you – *magiah lahem*-- they deserve the lollipop – or at least that's how *they* see it:

Little Jack Horner
Sat in the corner,
Eating a Christmas pie;
He put in his thumb
And pulled out a plum
And said: “What a good boy am I”

Such is human nature. I deserve my plum – I'm a good boy or girl. I am entitled to these things – my plums, my home in the suburbs, my vacations and my toys. And when we feel entitled to something, we are less likely to express gratitude for it because... well, because we expect it, we *deserve* it.

Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheynu Melech Haolom Hagomel L'chayavim tovot – she-g'malani kol tuv

“Praised are you Adonai our God, who rules the universe showing goodness to us beyond our merits and has treated me so favorably.”

We are *not* entitled – we are *not* deserving – and when life happens, however it happens - the appropriate response is gratitude and appreciation.

Look, this is a tough bit of torah I am trying to teach you today. And I am not sure which part of my message is more challenging –that we need to avoid a sense of entitlement and learn to appreciate the good things that we are blessed with, or that we need to learn to praise God and express a sense of acceptance if not appreciation when life is not so good to us and when times get tough.

Some 7-8 years ago my oldest brother died suddenly. *Baruch Dayan HaEmet*. And soon after the funeral and after the grieving I came to discover that I shared with my brother more than a

family resemblance, common gestures and a unique sense of humor. I learned that I too had a broken heart.

I will spare you the *detailed* explanation of what that means – although you know how much those of us with “medical conditions” love to bore you with the explicit details of our ailment – suffice it to say that after a few years attempting to deal with this, I was informed this past April that I needed surgery to fix my broken heart.

And so began my odyssey of the last 5 months – one that culminated in open heart surgery at the Mayo Clinic on July 22 and the slow and challenging process of recovery that continues as we speak. If you look at the covers of your Mahzorim, of your High Holy Day Prayer Books, you will notice that our new Mahzor is called, *Lev Shalem* – roughly translated, “a full heart, a complete heart.” It is what we seek on these sacred days – to be able to stand here, before God – with a *Lev Shalem*. And while I still seek to spiritually attain a *Lev Shalem*, I am so very happy to inform you that thanks to my recent surgery – maybe for the first time in my life, I physically stand before you with a *Lev Shalem*.

I am deeply touched by the amount of care and concern you have extended to me these past few weeks and will forever be grateful for your love and support but let me get something out in the open. My purpose in mentioning my surgery to you today is not to garner your sympathy. I recognize that many people sitting here have had challenges like mine and not a few of you are dealing with medical challenges far greater than mine. I am not interested in entering any sort of Illness Olympics – “You think you have it bad rabbi, you should to hear what I am going through?” Now, actually, I do want to hear what you are going through, but not because you might have it worse than me or I might have it worse than you, but because I now understand that these experiences, wherever they are on the life-threatening continuum - they test you, and affect you, and change you. And I just want to share with you – how *my* experience affected me and changed me – because, well, because I believe what I learned can help you - whether you are struggling with a life threatening illness or not.

Many of you gave me advice as I prepared for my surgery – some of it was wonderful and very helpful – some, well, *some* of it was wonderful and very helpful. One of my favorites came from a friend who sent this email in which he advised:

“Dear Alan: I hear that you are facing major surgery. As an older, wiser, but less erudite man who has been there, I will tell you the best strategy. Once you enter the hospital, give up all control. Relax. You ain't goin' nowhere. Put on the little booties they give you to keep your feet warm and do what they tell you. Tell as many jokes to the nurses as you can before you pass out from the anesthetic. A humorous patient is always appreciated. Try desperately not to repeat the names of your old girlfriends while under anesthesia when in your wife's presence. (I had shared this with Edy before my surgery – so when I came to in the ICU one of the first questions Edy asked me - -BTW I don't remember any of this – but Edy asked, “any old girlfriends you want to mention?” I responded (I am told) “Edy, Edy Edy!” Which apparently was the correct answer.)

And then my friend concluded, “And, most of all, know that our thoughts and affections will be with you along the way.”

I received another wonderful note from one of our congregants, he wrote: “Let me be presumptuous and turn the tables on you this one time and offer *you* some advice, based on *my* experience with open heart surgery...I went into this knowing about the risks, particularly

the risk of dying. So, when I awakened from the anesthesia, and I was ALIVE and I would get better – well I was now ahead of the game! That knowledge carried me through the entire recovery period, with the pain, the weakness, the fatigue, the therapy. For me it was the sense that I was “ahead of the game.” I was alive, and I was most thankful for that. No matter the discomforts I had to go through, I was ahead of the game...I wish the very best for you.” Now there is a man who knows about gratitude.

But, my message to you on this Rosh Hashanah day is more than: “Don’t worry, be happy!” No, my message to you on this most sacred of days is far subtler than that.

Jessica Fechter was a vibrant 28 year old writing her dissertation in Jewish Literature at Harvard. She was newly married and life was good – hard to imagine it being any better. When attending a conference in Stowe, Vermont, she goes early one morning to work out in the gym. And then she writes: “I am on the floor. My back flat against the ground. Someone is holding my head. I turn my head and vomit into her lap. My friend Ilana calls an ambulance. The gym guy thinks it is unnecessary – probably just dehydration. I was running on the treadmill when I felt a painless click in my head. There was an odd trickling sensation along my skull like a rolling bead of sweat, but on the inside. Then the room went gray and the earth sucked me down. Jessica Fechter would soon learn that she had survived – barely, a brain aneurysm. This summer she published a book titled, *Stir* and subtitled: “*My broken brain and the meals that brought me home.*” It is an interesting read into her long journey of recovery and how food – its tastes and smells, played such an important role in her recovery. But it is one paragraph that stayed with me the most.

Jessica writes: “Being sick is supposed to come along with grand realizations about What Really Matters, but I don’t know. I think deep down, we’re already aware of what’s important and what’s not. Which isn’t to say that we always live our lives accordingly. We snap at our spouses and curse the traffic and miss the buds pushing up from the ground. But we know. We just forget to know sometimes. Near-death forces us to remember. It pushes us into a state of aggressive-gratitude that throws what’s big and what’s small into the sharpest relief. It’s awfully hard to worry about the puddle of milk when you’re just glad to be here to spill it.”

She is so right – We do know; we just *forget to know* sometimes.”

Look, you don’t need me to tell you that life is precious. You don’t need me to tell you that your children, your husband or wife – the beautiful day and the air we breathe – is this news to you that these things are wonderful and dear? You know. Of course you know. But sometimes, too many times, you forget to know.

And I have come here today to remind you.

On Wednesday, July 29 I walked out of St. Mary’s Hospital in Rochester, Minnesota with Edy at my side. They brought me by wheelchair to the door – as is the procedure at most hospitals – but from there I, we, were on our own. And so we walked out of the hospital. For weeks prior to entering the hospital everyone – doctors, friends, even my surgeon had told me, “not to worry.” I don’t know about you – but nothing causes me to worry more than being told not to. A week ago when I had entered those very same doors – the unspoken thought that hung in the air between Edy and me was whether I would walk out of them. Despite all the “don’t worry’s – I worried – I suspect Edy did as well. And now, now I was leaving that hospital, going out on my own two feet. I paused to smell the sweet fresh air. I turned my face to the sky and felt the

warmth of the sun. It was a beautiful day - -oh, was it a beautiful day.

What had I learned? Some secret to life, previously hidden from my sight? Some new truth that my surgery and survival had unearthed?

There was nothing I knew walking out of that hospital that I had not known walking in. Had the day been any less beautiful a week earlier when I walked in those doors? Had my wife been any less precious, my children any less treasured, my life any less dear? Of course I knew – but I had forgotten to know. And I worry that so have too many of you.

Rosh Hashanah is called *Yom Hazikaron* – The Day of Remembrance – and on this particular *Yom Hazikaron* – I am asking you to remember what is too easily and too often forgotten: the beauty of our lives and the preciousness of our existence. On this sacred day we sound the *Shofar* to, as the *Rambam* says, “shake us from our lethargy.” It is in that same spirit that I offer my words to you today. Tekiah! Shevarim Teruah! Tekiah! Wake up! Wake up to what our daily liturgy calls: *Nissim she'be'chol yom imanu* – “the miracles that every day surround us.”

In 1950 Rabbi Milton Steinberg died at the age of 46. He was too young to die but not too young to have already become one of the preeminent rabbis of that period. He was the Senior Rabbi at the Park Avenue Synagogue. He was a revered speaker and teacher, author and preacher. His historical novel, ***As a Driven Leaf*** is arguably the most important Jewish novel of the 20th century. Shortly before he died, Rabbi Steinberg suffered a massive heart attack and delivered a sermon upon returning to the pulpit that, well that may well be the finest sermon ever written. Can you imagine quoting from a rabbi's sermon more than 65 years after it was delivered? Because that is what I am about to do. Remarkable.

Rabbi Steinberg's sermon was called, “To Hold With Open Arms.” And he too wrestled with this notion that we too often take for granted the simple beauties of being alive. That we know – but too often “forget to know!” Here is what he wrote:

“I too, have been indifferent to sunlight, how often preoccupied with petty and sometimes mean concerns, I had disregarded it. And I said to myself – how precious is the sunlight but alas, how careless of it are men. How precious—how careless. This has been a refrain sounding in me ever since.

It rang in my spirit when I entered my own home again after months of absence, when I heard from a nearby room the excited voices of my children at play; when I looked once more on the dear faces of some of my friends; when I was able for the first time to speak again from my pulpit in the name of our faith and tradition, to join in worship of the God who gives us so much of which we are so careless...I wanted to say to husbands and wives who love one another: 'How precious is your lot in that it is one of love. Do not be, even for a moment, casual with your good fortune. Love one another while yet you may.' And to parents: 'How precious is the gift of your children. Never be too busy for the wonder and miracle of them. They will be grown up soon enough and grown away too.' This is what struggled in me for utterance – as it struggled in Edna St. Vincent Millay when she cried out: 'O world I cannot hold thee close enough.'

I want to urge myself and all others to hold the world tight – to embrace life with all our hearts and all our souls and all our might. For it is precious, ineffably precious, and we are careless, wantonly careless of it.”

Beautiful, no? But that was only half of Rabbi Steinberg's message delivered more than 65 years ago. For he realizes that this is only half a truth. And he goes on to ask:

"Could I have retained the sunlight no matter how hard I tried? Could I have prevented the sun from setting? Could I have prevented even my own eyes from becoming satiated and bored with the glory of the day? The moment had to slip away. And had I tried to hold on to it, what would I have achieved? It would have gone from me in any case. And I would have been left disconsolate, embittered, convinced that I had been cheated.

But it is not only the sunlight that must slip away – our youth goes also, our years, our children, our senses, our lives. This is the nature of things, an inevitability. And the sooner we make our peace with it the better. Did I urge myself a moment ago to hold on? I would have done better, it now begins to appear, to have preached the opposite doctrine of letting go...for nothing can be more grotesque and more undignified than a futile attempt to hold on.

Let us think of the men and women who cannot grow old gracefully because they cling too hard to a youth that is escaping them; of the parents who cannot let their children go free to live their own lives; of the people who in times of general calamity have only themselves in mind.

What is it that drives people to such unseemly conduct, to such flagrant selfishness except the attitude which I have just commended – a vigorous holding on to life? This then is the great truth of human existence. One must *not* hold life too precious. One must always be prepared to let it go."

Now this is truly a paradox. First Rabbi Steinberg argues that life is a privilege – cling to it! But then he instructed: "Let it go, let it go!" How can one do both and which should one do when?

"It is a paradox," he concludes, "and a self-contradiction! But neither the paradox nor the contradiction are of *my* making. They are a law written into the scheme of things – that each of us must hold his or her existence dear and cheap at the same time.

But then, fortunately for us, Rabbi Steinberg offers a resolution to this contradiction. He did it with words – I would like to be a bit more demonstrative. I need some volunteers.

(Cantor....Rabbi Cara –will you help me here and Rabbi Kerbel, Sandy and Rebecca – will you please help me demonstrate this in your Service.)

We are involved in a tug of war: Here on the left, is the necessity to renounce life and all it contains. Here on the right, the yearning to affirm it and its experiences. And between these two is a terrible tension, for they pull in opposite directions.

But suppose that here in the center I introduce a third force, one that lifts upward. Look at what happens. My two irreconcilables that were once pulling in opposite directions now come together as they both pull against the new element- and the harder they pull, the closer together they come. (Thank you everyone)

Two irreconcilables that were once pulling in opposite directions now come together as they both pull against a new element. God is the third element, the new force that resolves the terrible contradiction, the intolerable tension of life. God is what makes life possible and brings together these opposing and contradictory forces.

"But you don't believe in God!" You say? Maybe not. Maybe yes. In survey after survey when

asked if they believed in God, significant numbers of people say either no – or that they are agnostics. However when the surveyors change the question slightly the results change dramatically. When asked not “if” God but “when God” – when was the last time they felt God in their lives. Large numbers of those very same people recounted a moment; an experience when they felt God had indeed touched their lives.

Look, I don't particularly care whether you believe that you believe.

And I don't particularly care how you imagine God – I have spent my career trying to get you to think this matter through - to dispense of your childish notions of God and religion and embrace a more mature sense of God – but for now that really does not matter. For now all you need to know is that the second you do believe in God the strain is eased, the tension dissipates – in fact it totally disappears.

If the major problem that confronts so many of us is, as I posit it, that we know, but we too often forget to know, than religion, certainly Judaism is the antidote, the daily dose of reminder of the beauty of our lives and the preciousness of our existence.

I put on my *tefillen* every morning and I am reminded, I say a bracha before and after the food I eat, we sound the *shofar* and gather on these sacred days – this *Yom Hazikaron* – to remind us. That is why I so love this place; these sacred days. Because here, I have my time – my quiet time with God, here I am reminded that God is, that God needs to be a part of my life.

Given God, everything becomes more precious.

That beautiful day I walked out of St. Mary's Hospital – it was no accident, not some fortunate happenstance. No, as it states in Psalm 118: *Ze hayom Asah Adonai* - That day was made by God, *Nagilah V'nismecha Bo* - that is why we must embrace and rejoice every day. To praise God for the good and the bad that comes into our lives.

The laughter of my children and grandchildren; the care of my wife; the sweetness of my friends. “Those who rally and come to mop your brow when you look like a ghost,” says Julia Baird in a recent New York Times Opinion piece on *her* experience with surgery, “those who try to make you laugh, distract you with silly stories, cook for you, or even drive or fly long distances just to hug you – are companions of the highest order. Your family is everything.” And this is how Ms. Baird concludes her lessons from her illness, “My doctor asked me a few days ago how I became so calm before surgery. I told her: I prayed, I locked out negativity and drama and drew my family and tribe near. I tried to live deliberately. “Can I just say,” her doctor replied, “you should do that for the rest of your life.”

Some of you may remember that I wrote something similar in one of my journal entries as I sat in the Minneapolis airport waiting for my connecting flight on my way home from the Mayo Clinic, I published it in our Temple bulletin:

“...it is an overwhelming sense of gratitude that dominates everything I am feeling.

I am grateful first and foremost to Edy and my kids who were at my side each step of the way. I don't know what I would have done without Edy. I won't go so far as to say it has been harder for her than me - but it certainly has not been easy.”

I am grateful to God that He has decided this is not yet my time. I have wrestled with God and the wisdom of a lot of His decisions, many of which I do not understand. But for the record, I

agree with this one wholeheartedly.

I am also grateful for the miracle of healing that I am now experiencing. "With wisdom God has created us..." (Psalm 104:24) the body is a miraculous thing and the progress is there even if it is not a straight line.

I am grateful to a wonderful team of doctors and nurses in Rochester AND in NY who have tended to me with great skill, wisdom and enormous kindness. I will never ever be able to adequately express my appreciation for all you have done - for the support you gave Edy and continue to give me - if half of your patients feel as blessed as I do that you are in my life - you should feel very fulfilled by what you do.

I am grateful to all of you - for your comments, your outreach, your calls, texts and emails, your cards, flowers and edible treats, reading and entertainment materials and of course visits and most of all for your prayers. It is so humbling to know that so many people have expressed such concern and reminds me how fortunate I am to have a community of friends like you to return to.

On this *Yom Hazikaron*, On this Day of Remembrance, I am grateful that God has blessed me with a *Lev Shalem*.

And I will try to remember all that for the rest of my life.