



ABOUT OUR LEARNING MATERIALS

“And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy.” *Genesis 2:3*

Shabbat. Each week we have the opportunity to gather together, to find comfort, to restore our souls. Shabbat is a reminder to create space in our lives for what is most important and sacred, to affirm our part in making the world more whole. Shabbat is a gift.

How do we create this holy gift each week? How might we deepen our understanding and practice of Shabbat? This year, journey with your Sh'ma group through learning materials which explore different aspects of Shabbat. You will discuss prayers, ancient and modern interpretations, reflections from Temple clergy and more.

As always, if you have any questions, please be in touch with Alexandra Horn (ahorn@tedallas.org) or Rabbi Kim Herzog Cohen (kherzogcohen@tedallas.org).

Why is it so hard to say 'thank you'?

Modim

מוֹדִים אֲנַחְנוּ לָךְ, שְׂאֵתָה הוּא, יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ וְאֲמוֹתֵינוּ,
לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד, צוּר חַיֵּינוּ, מָגֵן יִשְׁעֵנוּ, אֵתָה הוּא לְדוֹר וָדוֹר.

*Modim anachnu lach, shaatah hu Adonai Eloheinu v'Elohei avoteinu v'imoteinu
l'olam va-ed. Tzur chayeinu, magen yisheinu, atah hu l'dor vador.*

We acknowledge with thanks that You are Adonai, our God and the God of our ancestors forever.
You are the Rock of our lives, and the shield of our salvation in every generation.

COMMENTARY

Rabbi Sheila Peltz Weinberg

Gratitude is very important in the liberation process. Like acceptance, gratitude roots us in the present moment. It is a spiritual tool that frees us from the human tendency to suffer because of our unfulfilled desires and cravings. The bondage of dissatisfaction can be broken with praise and gratitude for what we have received. This unleashes energy, produces happiness, and leads to more gratitude.

Gratefulness by Rainer Maria Rilke

If the angel
deigns to come
it will be because
you have convinced
her, not by tears
but by your humble
resolve to be always
beginning; to be
a beginner.

Rabbi Daniel Utley

Famously, Yitzchak Perlman once played through a concert after breaking one of the strings on his violin. At the end, he said to the audience, “sometimes it is the artist’s task to find out how much beautiful music you can still make with what you have left.” Researchers in Positive Psychology teach us that 40 percent, or nearly half of our feelings of well-being (happiness) lie fully within our control. It’s not accurate to say that optimists or pessimists were just born that way. Only 50 percent of what makes us happy is determined by genetics and the remaining 10 percent is made up of random life events.

We’ve all met people who simply seem to thrive in life, even in the face of great challenges, loss, or even tragedy, and we’ve certainly met others who appear to live permanently under a grey cloud. Why? Happiness and well-being take practice. And people who tend towards such a demeanor have knowingly or unknowingly developed habits or learned practices that reinforce positive feelings of well-being.

Professor Sonja Lyubomirsky names practicing gratitude and positive thinking as one of the fundamental learned behaviors that help us achieve happiness. She writes, “Gratitude is wonder, it is appreciation, it is looking on the bright side of a setback, it is fathoming abundance, it is thanking someone in your life, it is thanking God, it is literally ‘counting blessings.’ It is savoring, it is not taking things for granted, it is coping, it is present-oriented.” Individuals who are able to develop regular habits for expressing gratitude find that they enjoy feeling generally happier, more hopeful, and report experiencing more positive emotions.

Giving thanks (*Hakarat HaTov*) is core to our Jewish spiritual framework: most of our prayers take the form of blessings that thank God for something in our lives, or in the Jewish people’s past/present/future. But we can easily develop habits for practicing gratitude on an individual basis even without opening a Siddur. It is as simple as pausing to reflect for a moment each day and naming several things for which you feel thankful: events, people, opportunities, anything. If that’s a struggle, it can be helpful to work backward from a place of current disappointment: name a present-day difficulty and imagine what possibilities it could contain for which you might eventually feel grateful. (e.g. a job loss could lead to a more rewarding career). In the words of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov “Seek the good, reveal it, bring it forth.” Even in our darkest moments, we can begin by finding just one portion of light.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why do you think Rilke entitled the poem Gratefulness? What is the connection between gratitude and always beginning?
2. If gratitude is a practice, how do you practice gratitude again and again? When is it most difficult to do so?