

## Sermon by Rabbi Eliezer Hirsch Vayeitzei 20 "Modeh Ani"

Gut Shabbos. Shabbat shalom. And Happy Thanksgiving weekend.

In this week's parsha, Yaakov comes into his own, so to speak. His parents send him away to find a wife on his own, in contrast to his father, and in the process, he becomes independent of his family.

The Sages teach us that during his journey, Yaakov stopped to retire for the night and slept on the Temple Mount. As he slept, he received a prophecy from God, and upon awakening,

promised that if God takes care of him, *asser aasrenu lach*, he will give 10% back from everything God gives him. At first glance, it sounds as though Yaakov was proposing a business transaction – you give me x, and I'll give you y. But I think if we look closer, we'll find that his intention was not transactional at all.

The best way to understand Yaakov's notion about tithing is to compare it with his brother Eisav's. In last week's parsha, we read that Yitzchak loved Eisav because he was *tzayid bepiv/ cunning in his mouth*, and Rashi interprets that verse to mean that Eisav was dishonest with his father and tried to present himself as a righteous person. By way of example, Rashi says that Eisav asked Yitzchak how to tithe salt and straw. I think the reason why he specifically chose those items is because salt and straw are there for the taking and do not depend on a collaboration with God. So Eisav's tithing was simple payback for what God provided – truly like a business deal. In contrast, Yaakov viewed his tithing the way a farmer does – a farmer has a give and take with God; the farmer toils in the fields but depends on God to provide rain and other favorable environmental conditions. So in that context, *maaser/tithing* is an expression of appreciation not only for physical prosperity but also for his relationship with God.

Another way to understand this distinction is found in the meaning of two concepts that are commonly misconstrued. Eisav displayed *hakarat hatov*, which is usually mistranslated as *gratitude*. It actually means a cold acknowledgement of where you come from, which is what Eisav expressed in honoring his father – he was giving payback, or as the saying goes, credit where credit is due. In contrast, Yaakov introduced the concept of *hoda'ah*, which is heartfelt gratitude that develops within a warm relationship.

Although I'm a vegetarian, I'd still like to point out that our custom to eat turkey on Thanksgiving may not be a coincidence. The modern Hebrew word for turkey is *hodu*, which fittingly has a double meaning of Thanksgiving.

I think the message of Thanksgiving and this week's parsha was beautifully expressed this month by Israeli actress Gal Gadot in an interview with Vanity Fair magazine. She said, "I'm lucky - I say thank you every morning. In the Jewish culture there is a prayer you're supposed to say when you wake up in the morning. You say *modeh ani*, which

means *I give thanks*. So every morning I get out of bed and say thank you for everything. Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you.” As the interview ended, she closed her eyes for a moment as if reciting the prayer over again and said, “Nothing is to be taken for granted.” An important thought to take with us as we conclude this Thanksgiving weekend. Shabbat shalom.