



Hello Temple Sinai,

Tov L'hodot – it is good to give thanks!

Happy Thanksgiving! I know it is strange this year not being able to be together with friends and family in the ways we are used to, but if we are able to read this, it means we are alive; being alive is a good place to start the practice of gratitude.

I want to say how profoundly grateful I am to be elected to serve Temple Sinai for the next five years. It is such a joy working together to build a vibrant Jewish community here in our area, and it feels that in the two-and-a-half years I've been your rabbi, we have only gotten started. We are growing, diversifying, working on long-term goals while doing our best to respond to the here and now. I am grateful for your support, patience, and look forward to our future together.

I am also grateful to Tim who is in this work with me, giving his time and energy (and free time) while giving up time together. It wouldn't be doable without his support.

I am grateful for a long list of people in this congregation, many of whom I thanked at the meeting. I will just say that as you are reflecting on the people you are grateful for, think of some of the great work people in this community have done and are doing to make this synagogue a living community in our larger community. It is inspiring.

I was listening to the podcast *Hidden Brain* recently. The episode was called: *Where Gratitude Gets You*. It focused on the work of David DeSteno, a psychologist and professor at Northeastern University. Dr. DeSteno studies the role of social emotions on decision making, and his findings about gratitude are very interesting.

In an article in the New York Times, DeSteno points out that our ability to defer immediate pleasure for long-term gain is a key factor in success of many kinds. He writes,

study after study has linked self-control to achievement in a wide range of areas, including personal finance, healthful eating and exercise, and job performance. Put simply, those who can persevere toward their long-term goals in the face of temptation to do otherwise — those who have “grit” — are best positioned for success.

This has given rise to the industry of self-discipline and methods for training ourselves to put off immediate pleasure for long-term goals. The problem is that the research also shows that those methods work in the short term, but in the long-term self-discipline tends to revert to habit.

Why don't we stick to our resolutions? DeSteno's answer is that we are wrong to see self-discipline as being a fight with our emotions, as if disciplined mind is conquering the emotional hedonist. “We too often think about self-improvement and the pursuit of our goals in bracing, self-flagellating terms,” he writes and argues that by relying on analysis and willpower to reach our goal, we are *disadvantaging ourselves*. : DeSteno argues that evolution has given us a much better tool for motivating us.

That tool is our social emotions. These are the emotions — things like gratitude and compassion — that support the positive aspects of social life. For years I've been studying the effects of these emotions on decision-making and behavior, and I've found that unlike reason and willpower, they naturally incline us to be patient and persevere. When you are experiencing these emotions, self-control is no longer a battle, for they work not by squashing our desires for pleasure in the moment but by increasing how much we value the future.

In terms of the emotion of gratitude, it turns out that simply reflecting for a few minutes on something you are grateful for changes your behavior, and your ability to put off immediate gratification for future goals. When DeSteno's lab followed people with a daily practice of gratitude, they found their choice to defer immediate gain doubled, because the gratitude practice gave them a more hopeful view of the future.

And it turns out that this social emotion and religious emotion of gratitude changes our view of the future and helps us be more successful in reaching our goals. Additionally, DeSteno's research shows,

that when we make people feel grateful, they'll spend more time helping anyone who asks for assistance, they'll make financial decisions that benefit partners equally (rather than ones that allow profit at a partner's expense), and they'll show loyalty to those who have helped them even at costs to themselves. [([Click here](#) for a link to the article "The Only Way to Keep Your Resolutions" by Dr. DeSTeno)]

In Judaism, we have always been taught that we can best reach our goals and be better people by practicing gratitude. In the face of destruction and exile, the rabbis promoted a practice of giving thanks for the gifts of daily life. We are taught that we should aim to say 100 blessings every day. Each of those blessings is a practice of gratitude and mindfulness. The morning begins with a series of "everyday miracles" as we wake up, open our eyes, stretch, sit up, get dressed, wash our face, and – yes- go to the bathroom. The Psalms are overwhelming poems of thanksgiving, and the importance of gratitude finds its clearest expression the opening line of Psalm 92:

Tov L'hodot - It is good to give thanks.

Wishing you a meaningful Thanksgiving however you celebrate it this year.

Today,

David, Tim and Mr.
Ginsberg



P.S. We will have our usual Friday Shabbat service at 6:30, with a focus on thanksgiving. We will also have our Shabbat morning services at 9:30 on Saturday, followed by Torah Study at 10:30. This week's portion is [Parashat Vayetzei](#). Please join us.