Good Shabbos, everyone.
Thank you to the *drasha* sponsors:

- Mordechai and Miriam Gordon, in memory of Miriam's mother, Betty Frost Eisner, Basya bas Menachem Mendel, whose *yahrtzeit* is the 21st of Kislev. May her *neshama* have an *aliya*.
- Avigdor and Beth Loeb, who are sponsoring this drasha in memory of Avigdor's mother, Ann Loeb, Chana bas Alan, whose *yahrtzeit* was the 14th of Kislev, May her *neshama* have an *aliya*.

May the sponsors be rewarded for their support of the shul with *bracha, hatzlacha*, and good health.

This week, our nation celebrated Thanksgiving. Most of us grew up with the familiar story of the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag sharing a harvest meal in 1621. But the story of how Thanksgiving became a national holiday is more interesting, and far more relevant to us.

In 1789, George Washington issued the first Thanksgiving proclamation under the new Constitution. Among the blessings for which he asked Americans to give thanks, he listed "the civil and religious liberty with which we are blessed." For a Jewish community, that is not an abstract political principle. It describes the extraordinary opportunity we have had in this country to build shuls and schools and to live openly as Jews.

But Thanksgiving did not become an annual national observance until 1863. And consider the moment. America was in the middle of the Civil War. The country was tearing itself apart. Families were burying sons. That summer, Gettysburg alone left approximately 50,000 casualties.

It might seem like the worst possible time to declare a national day of gratitude.

And yet President Abraham Lincoln's proclamation begins: *"The year that is drawing towards its close has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies."* He explicitly acknowledged the extraordinary circumstances in which he was calling upon Americans to give thanks: *"In the midst of a civil war of unequaled magnitude and severity."* And he asked Americans to *"thank God for the blessings that remained,*" and to pray that He *"heal the wounds of the nation, and to restore it, as soon as may be consistent with the Divine purposes, to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquility, and union.*"

President Lincoln did not establish Thanksgiving because America had <u>overcome</u> its crisis. He established it because America, even in the midst of a crisis, needed to <u>remember</u> its blessings.

There is something deeply Jewish in that. We do not wait until the ultimate redemption to say Hallel, and we do not wait until every challenge is solved to say *Modim*. Every morning, before we know what the day will bring, the first words out of our mouths are מוֹדֶה אֲנִי לְפָנֶיךָ. We thank Hashem first, and then we face the day.

That idea, gratitude in the middle of the struggle, with the wounds still open, lies at the heart of this week's *parsha*. Yaakov Avinu is about to meet his brother, Esav, after more than 20 years. He is frightened. He *davens*, he sends gifts, he divides his camp and prepares for a fight. And even before the struggle was over, Yaakov expresses his gratitude. Before he wrestled with the angel, before he faced Esav, before he knew whether he and his family would survive, he had already said:

קָטֹנְתִּי מִכֹּל הַחֲסָדִים וּמִכָּל הָאֱמֶת אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתָ אֶת עַבְדֶּךָ כִּי בְמַקְלִי עָבַרְתִּי אֶת הַיַּרְדֵּן הַזֶּה וְעַתָּה הָיִיתִי לִשְׁנֵי מַחֲנוֹת.

I am unworthy of all the kindness that You have so steadfastly shown Your servant: with my staff alone I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps (Breishis 32:11). He did not wait for his fears to disappear, or for his life to be easy, before recognizing Hashem's kindness.

Then, in the middle of the night, alone, he wrestles until dawn with a mysterious man. Yaakov eventually prevails. He receives a new name: לֹא יַעֲקֹב יֵאָמֵר עוֹד שִׁמְךָ כִּי אִם יִשְׂרָאֵל, כִּי שָׂרִיתָ עִם אֱלֹקִים וְעִם אֲנָשִׁים וַתּוּכָל, *"Your name will no longer be Yaakov, but Yisrael, for you have striven with God and with men, and prevailed."*

But the Torah does not end the story with the victory. It ends with this: וְהוּא, וַיִּזְרַח לוֹ הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ כַּאֲשֶׁר עָבַר אֶת פְּנוּאֵל צֹלֵעַ עַל יְרֵכוֹ "The sun rose for him as he passed Penuel, and he was limping on his hip." (*Bereishis* 32:32)

Why tell us about the limp at precisely this moment? Yaakov has won. He has a new name, a new identity, a new future. Why end with the injury? Because he is not a man who has no more struggles. He is a man who has learned to continue moving forward despite them. And the Torah does not let us forget. The very next *pasuk* establishes the prohibition of the *gid hanasheh*. One night's struggle became a permanent part of Jewish memory, a reminder that life can continue, even though we are still limping.

What enabled Yaakov to recognize Hashem's kindness even while his future remained so uncertain? Perhaps the answer lies in the two words he puts side by side in his tefillah of appreciation: *chesed* and *emes*. Kindness and truth. To understand the relationship between those two words, we need to return to an earlier chapter in Yaakov's life, to the birth of his fourth son.

We learn gratitude from Yaakov's wife, Leah. When Leah gave birth to her fourth son, she said הפעם אודה את ה', "This time I will thank Hashem," and she named him Yehudah. And the Gemara (*Berachos* 7b) says something astonishing: מִיּוֹם שֶׁבָּרָא הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא אֶת עוֹלָמוֹ לֹא הָיָה אָדָם שֶׁהוֹדָה לְהַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא, עַד שֶׁבָּאתָה לֵאָה וְהוֹדַתּוּ. *"From the day Hashem created His world, no one had thanked Him until Leah came and thanked Him."*

And the **Medrash** (*Bereishis Rabbah* 71:5) traces what grew from that moment: לֵאָה תָּפְסָה פֶּלֶךְ הוֹדָיָה, וְעָמְדוּ מִמֶּנָּה בַּעֲלֵי הוֹדָיָה "Leah took hold of the spindle of *hoda'ah*, and from her came masters of *hoda'ah*."
Who were they? Yehudah: וַיַּכֵּר יְהוּדָה וַיֹּאמֶר צָדְקָה מִמֶּנִּי. Dovid HaMelech: הוֹדוּ לַה' כִּי טוֹב.
Look carefully at those examples. Dovid was thanking Hashem. But Yehudah is not thanking anyone. Yehudah is confessing. When Tamar sends him the signet, the cloak, and the staff, he publicly admits that he was wrong: צָדְקָה מִמֶּנִּי, "She is more righteous than I."

Why does the Medrash count Yehudah's confession as part of Leah's legacy of thanks?

Rav Hutner points out (*Pachad Yitzchak Chanuka*) that in Hebrew, *hoda'ah* means both. לְהוֹדוֹת means to thank, and לְהוֹדוֹת means to admit. *Vidui* and *hoda'ah* come from the same place.
פחד יצחק חנוכה מאמר ב:ה:ובשעה שאדם מביע את הכרת טובתו לחברו ונותן לו תודה, באותה שעה יש כאן הודאת בעל דין כי בפעם הזאת אמנם לא עלתה בידו והיה עליו להשתמש בטובתו של חבירו. באופן שהשרש הנפשי העמוק של כל הבעת תודה הוא מעשה הודאה.
And at the moment a person expresses his gratitude to another and thanks him, he is simultaneously making an admission against his own interest: that on this particular occasion, he was unable to manage on his own and had to rely upon the kindness of another. Thus, the deepest psychological root of every expression of gratitude is an act of admission.

To thank another person is to admit that I am not entirely self-sufficient. Gratitude requires the humility to admit that I needed someone else. When I confess, I admit the truth about myself: I was wrong. When I thank, I admit the truth about someone else: You did something for me that I could not do for myself. Both require me to surrender the illusion of self-sufficiency. Both begin when I stop making myself the center of the story.

That is why the Hebrew phrase is *hakaras hatov*, recognizing the good. Before gratitude is a feeling, it is an act of honesty. And ingratitude, *kefiyas tovah*, is literally a denial, a refusal to acknowledge what is true. Perhaps that is another dimension of Yaakov's pairing of chesed and emes. To recognize a kindness is to tell the truth about it.
The **Gemara (*Berachos* 58a)** makes this vivid. Ben Zoma describes two guests who leave a meal. The good guest says: כַּמָּה טָרְחוֹת טָרַח בַּעַל הַבַּיִת בִּשְׁבִילִי, "How much effort the host went to for me! How much meat he brought, how much wine, how many delicacies, and all of it for me." The bad guest says: מַה טּוֹרַח טָרַח בַּעַל הַבַּיִת זֶה? "What effort did this host make? I ate one piece of bread, I drank one cup. Whatever he did, he did for his own family." The two guests ate the same meal The difference between them is not merely their manners. It is

their honesty; what they allow themselves to see. The good guest sees what actually happened: Someone went to great trouble for him. The bad guest tells himself a story that makes the gift disappear. Ingratitude is not only rude. It is a way of not seeing the truth. On that same *daf*, Ben Zoma looked out at the crowds on Har HaBayis and said: כַּמָּה יְגִיעוֹת יָגַע אָדָם הָרִאשׁוֹן עַד שֶׁמָּצָא פַּת לֶאֱכוֹל. "How much work Adam HaRishon had to do before he could eat a piece of bread." וַאֲנִי מַשְׁכִּים וּמוֹצֵא כָּל אֵלּוּ מְתֻקָּנִים לְפָנַי. "And I wake up in the morning and find it all prepared for me." Ben Zoma saw the farmers, and the bakers, and the merchants behind every loaf. He refused to let the effort of other people become invisible. That is what it means to be a good guest, not only at a friend's table, but in Hashem's world.

We live in a world in which almost everything arrives ready-made. We turn on a light, open a refrigerator, or walk into a supermarket, and we rarely think about the countless people whose labor made it possible. Perhaps the greatest danger of abundance is that the more we receive, the less we notice how much we have been given.

Yaakov himself understood this. When he said קָטֹנְתִּי מִכֹּל הַחֲסָדִים, **Rashi** explains: נִתְמַעֲטוּ זְכֻיּוֹתַי עַל יְדֵי הַחֲסָדִים וְהָאֱמֶת שֶׁעָשִׂיתָ עִמִּי. "My merits have been diminished by all the kindness and truth You have done for me." Yaakov feared that the kindnesses Hashem had already shown him had used up his merits. Yaakov understood that every kindness he had received was a gift, not an entitlement. And when we understand that what we have received is a gift rather than something owed to us, it changes the way we live. Every kindness we receive should make us feel not more entitled, but more responsible.

How far does this obligation of gratitude go?
The Alter of Slabodka, **Rav Nosson Tzvi Finkel,** in his *Ohr HaTzafun* (vol. 1, p. 184), makes a remarkable claim: שֶׁבְּעַד כָּל טוֹבָה שֶׁאָדָם מְקַבֵּל מֵחֲבֵרוֹ, אֵין שִׁעוּר לַגְּמוּל וְלַשִּׁעְבּוּד שֶׁהוּא חַיָּב לוֹ בְּמֶשֶׁךְ כָּל יְמֵי חַיָּיו וּלְדוֹרֵי דוֹרוֹת, בַּאֲשֶׁר יֵשׁ עֵרֶךְ רַב לְכָל פְּעֻלַּת חֶסֶד, וְהִיא נוֹגַעַת בְּמִדּוֹתָיו שֶׁל הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא שֶׁהוּא מְקוֹר הַחֶסֶד
For every kindness a person receives from his friend, there is no limit to the repayment and the indebtedness he owes him, all the days of his life and for generations to come, because every act of chesed has enormous value, and it touches the very attributes of Hakadosh Baruch Hu, who is the source of all chesed.

We tend to treat a kindness as a transaction. You helped me; I thanked you; we are even. The Alter says we are never even. An act of *chesed* is not a small thing between two people. When one person does a kindness for another, he is imitating Hashem. And a debt to something divine cannot be paid off with a thank-you note.

The Torah teaches this with a striking example. When the time came for the first plague in Egypt, to strike the Nile with the plague of blood, Hashem did not tell Moshe to strike it. Aharon did instead. Rashi explains (*Shemos* 7:19): לְפִי שֶׁהַנֶּהָר הֵיאוֹר עַל מֹשֶׁה כְּשֶׁנִּשְׁלַךְ לְתוֹכוֹ, "because the river had protected Moshe when he was placed in it as a baby." Eighty years later, Moshe was still "indebted" to the river. Not a person. A river. And the debt had not expired.

If that is how we must treat water, how much more so the people in our lives--the parents who raised us, the teachers who taught us, the friends who stood by us, the spouse who shares our burdens with us. And how much more so a country that gave our grandparents refuge and gave us the freedom to build Torah lives.

There is a fascinating halacha that captures how personal this debt is. Throughout Chazaras HaShatz, the chazzan can give voice to our tefillos. But when he reaches Modim, something remarkable happens. Every one of us says Modim D'Rabbanan for ourselves (Sotah 40a). The **Abudraham** explains that there is something about giving thanks that demands personal expression. There are some things another person cannot adequately say for us.

But if gratitude is an endless debt, how are we supposed to repay it? The **Ramchal** answers in *Mesilas Yesharim* (ch. 8). What strengthens a person's *zrizus*, his eagerness in *avodas Hashem*, is: הַהִסְתַּכְּלוּת בְּרֹב הַטּוֹבוֹת

שֶׁהַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא עוֹשֶׂה עִם הָאָדָם בְּכָל עֵת וּבְכָל שָׁעָה "Looking at the abundance of good that *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* does for a person at every moment and every hour."
And he continues: כִּי הֲרֵי הוֹאִיל וְאֵינוֹ יָכוֹל וַדַּאי לִגְמוֹל לוֹ טוֹבָתוֹ יִתְבָּרַךְ, לְפָחוֹת יוֹדֶה לִשְׁמוֹ וְיקַיֵּם מִצְוֹתָיו
"Since a person certainly cannot repay Hashem for His goodness, at the very least he should thank His Name and fulfill His *mitzvos*."

The Alter tells us the debt has no limit. The Ramchal tells us what to do about it. We cannot repay it. But we can respond to it. And that is an invitation to live a life worthy of what we have received. Gratitude that is real does not make us complacent. It makes us move forward with passion. Gratitude looks backward and recognizes what we have received. *Zrizus* looks forward and asks what we will do with it.

This message is particularly important this year. We have so much to be grateful for. We live in a country that has given the Jewish people extraordinary opportunity--religious freedom, the ability to build institutions of Torah, and the privilege of participating fully in society. Washington's words, "the civil and religious liberty with which we are blessed," describe our lives.

At the same time, many in our community are anxious. The events of recent months have brought into sharp focus questions about antisemitism, about current attitudes here towards Israel and about the future of Jewish life in America. It would be dishonest to stand here and say that everything is fine. And if gratitude is rooted in *emes,* then dishonesty is not gratitude. But that same *emes* demands that we not let our worries erase our blessings. Yaakov understood that. Lincoln understood that. You do not have to ignore the wounds to see the sunrise, and you do not have to wait for the wounds to heal before you give thanks.

We can be grateful without being complacent. We can be concerned without being paralyzed. The question is not only whether we are worried about the future of Jewish life. It is also what we will do about it. Will we strengthen our schools and our shuls? Will we invest in the next generation? Will we stand up when Jews are targeted and answer hatred with a deeper commitment to who we are?

That is gratitude translated into action. And it begins closer to home. The Alter of Slabodka would ask each of us: Who in your life are you in debt to? A parent who sacrificed for you. A rebbe or a teacher who believed in you before you believed in yourself. A friend who showed up when no one else did. A spouse who carries the weight of the home without ever being thanked for it. Many of us gathered around Thanksgiving tables this week. Perhaps this *Motzei Shabbos* is the appropriate time to make one phone call, or write one email or text message, to someone we have never properly thanked. And perhaps the person we most need to thank is not someone who did one extraordinary kindness, but someone whose kindness has become so constant that we have stopped noticing it. That is the lesson of *Modim*: We need to say ourselves those things no one else can say for us.

Let us return one last time to Yaakov at Penuel. He is limping. He still has to face Esav. He does not know what the day will bring. But the sun has risen, he has a new name, and he walks forward. The limp reminds us of the struggle. The new name reminds us of the transformation. And the sunrise reminds us that, even on a day that is still hard, the blessings are real. Yaakov did not wait for the limp to disappear before moving forward. He carried it into the day ahead.

We carry two names as a people. We are Bnei **Yisrael**, heirs to Yaakov's capacity to struggle and persevere. And we are *Yehudim*, heirs to Leah's capacity to recognize and acknowledge the good. And perhaps that is what it means to live up to both names: to acknowledge the wounds without allowing them to obscure the blessings, and to recognize the blessings without allowing them to excuse us from responsibility. May Hashem give us the honesty to see His kindness, the humility to acknowledge how much we have received, and the courage to turn our gratitude into lives of Torah, *chesed*, and responsibility. And even when we are limping, may we never fail to see the sunrise.