The Gift of Gratitude

*Shana Tova!* Tonight during services we did something we’ve been doing for most of the year on Shabbat. Rather than just reading the prayer of gratitude which has been penned for us by the editor, we spent a few moments thinking of things specific to ourselves for which we want to give thanks. It’s an attempt to be more aware of the good that is in our lives. When we take the time to stop and think about it, we realize that there is plenty for which to be grateful, though you’d never know it from speaking with some folks.

There are people in the world – and we all know some of them – for whom nothing is ever right. These are people who seem to spend their entire lives “standing at the complaint counter.” Steve Goodier tells the story of one such woman who frequented a small antique shop. She complained constantly about the prices, the quality and even the location. And yet she kept coming back. The shop owners took it in stride, but one day, while ranting about selection, she said to the clerk, “Why is it I never manage to get what I ask for in your shop?” The clerk smiled and replied, “Possibly because we’re too polite.”

When life feels difficult, as it often does, it’s very easy to find ourselves standing at the complaint counter, listing all of the difficulties of our day, getting more and more annoyed as we think about them. Have you ever thought about why department stores have complaint counters but no gratitude counters? How much business do you think a gratitude counter would get? Because even when we do recognize our blessings, we don’t necessarily take the next step and offer thanks. The *modim*, the daily prayer of gratitude, is a reminder of the enduring wisdom of Jewish tradition. Saying this prayer helps us to move from complaining to noticing blessings, and then from noticing to giving thanks. It moves us from the complaint counter to the gratitude counter. It reminds us that so much of our life is really, really good, and we could be a lot happier if we paid attention. It’s summed up in a piece of advice from Bob Orben: “The next time you feel like complaining, remember that your garbage disposal eats better than thirty percent of the people in the world.”

Most of us know this already. We know how lucky we really are. It’s just that life gets in the way of keeping it in mind. That’s one of the reasons daily prayer or meditation can be so helpful; it usually includes expressions of gratitude. For those who don’t have a daily practice, remembering to be grateful sometimes takes a major shake-up in life. Tonight I want to share with you an example of that. It’s from a column by E.J Montini that appeared years ago in the Arizona Republic. You’ll be able to tell how long ago by his references to current events. He writes:

“The message was recorded at 8:22 A.M. Tuesday, August 4. The caller, a woman, spoke for thirty seconds. I know the time and date and duration from the fancy telephone answering system at the newspaper. What I don’t know, exactly, is why I have not yet deleted the message.

Every other message from that day is gone, listened to and then erased. But not this one.

“'Mr. Montini,” she said, “My name is Debbie. I’m . . . I’m dying of liver cancer and I just . . . I just wanted to tell you, ‘Thank you very much’ for your articles. Now that I have so little time, I’m thanking all the people who have done something special for me in my life . . . bye.”

She’s wrong. I never did anything special for this woman. The newspaper articles she thanks me for writing weren’t done for her. They were done for me, like every article I do. Including this one. I figure on some level, Debbie knows this, or at least senses it. Still, she thanked me. And I haven’t erased her call.

Voice mail is like a dripping faucet. If the bucket underneath isn’t periodically emptied -- to water the garden or fill the pet bowls or wash the car -- it spills over and is wasted. It is not economical to leave a little something at the bottom of the container.

Yet, there it is, all these days later, the soft voice of a woman speaking to an answering machine early one Tuesday.

She talks calmly and evenly, hesitating only once and only for an instant. She asks for nothing and doesn’t leave a number. She’s not expecting a return call.

On one of her last days, she wasted thirty precious seconds, maybe a couple of minutes when you add in the time it took to collect her thoughts, get the telephone number, dial and so on.

It’s too much time to spend on a stranger who hasn’t done a thing for you, except by accident.

“Thank you so much,” she says at the end, “And I wish you a lot of luck, fortune and happiness. Bye.” That’s it.

I’ve listened to Debbie’s message more than a dozen times. In all the thirty seconds of her monologue, she does not once mention the importance of a stain on the dress of a former White House intern.

The dress was extremely important to several callers before her and after her. But not to Debbie.

She didn’t bring up El Nino, either, nor the race to break Roger Maris’ home run record.

Debbie didn’t discuss Geraldo Rivera’s feud with Tom Brokaw, the primary elections scheduled for next month, the movie, “Titanic,” the fall television schedule, the list of the l00 best movies of the century or Jerry Seinfeld’s HBO special.

She doesn’t mention her First Amendment right to free speech, her Second Amendment right to bear arms, her inalienable right to life, liberty or the pursuit of happiness, or any other rights.

Nor does she complain about a single wrong. I’ve had many messages since August 4th from people who believe they’ve been wronged. None of them is dealing with anything close to liver cancer.

What about all the violence in the movies and all the sex on TV? Or all the violence in the streets and all the sex in the White House? These are things we KNOW are important. They’re in all the papers. They’re on TV.

Debbie didn’t even hint at them. Instead, she made time at the end of her life to thank a guy she doesn’t know for doing a job he gets paid to do.

I hate to contradict a person in her situation, but Debbie doesn’t know what she’s talking about. She’s got it completely backward. It was she who did something special for me. She gave me a gift.

I was going to save it for myself, but some gifts only have value if they are shared. That’s why, if you’ve read this far, there’s only one thing left for me to say to you. Thanks.”

I agree with my colleague, Jack Riemer, who sent me the story, and wrote, “I don’t know what your reaction is to that story. Mine is a quiet, hushed ‘Wow.’ Think of it -- a human being in the last days of her life, suffering from liver cancer, takes the time to say, ‘Thank you’ to everyone who has brought a bit of light into her life, even the newspaper columnist whom she has never met. A woman in such a situation calls, not to lament and not to complain, not to bemoan her fate and not to lash out, but just to say, ‘Thank you’???”

And we? How often do we say, “Thank you?” To those we love . . . much less to the stranger? To the spouse who makes our life a joy, to the children who enrich us, to the parents who made us, to the teachers who taught us, much less to the newspaper columnist? How often do we take the few seconds it takes to get to the gratitude counter and offer a compliment?

If Judaism has anything to teach us, it is the art of being grateful. Our tradition has created a whole network of blessings . . . for the sunset and the rainbow, for the ocean and the bread, for the wine and the new suit of clothing, for hearing good news and for hearing bad news, for tasting fruits and for drinking water, for hearing thunder and for seeing lightning, and for so many more of the special moments and the ordinary moments in our lives. And, as I have said before, if you don’t know the blessing, you can make one up: “Baruch atah Adonai, Praised are You God, for a beautiful sunrise”. “Baruch atah Adonai, Thank you for the smile on my grandchild’s face.”

And even more important than thanking God is thanking other people. Your co-worker, your friend, your loved one. The 30 seconds that Debbie spent thanking E.J. Montini had a profound effect on him. Think what a few words of appreciation on a daily basis would do for all of our relationships.

Rabbi Riemer says that the essential division in the world is between those who have and are grateful for that, and those who have but are not grateful. I am not asking you which group you have belonged to in the past. Going forward, in this New Year, 5778, may we resolve to join the first group, the ones who are grateful and let others know it. It will make others happy and it will make our own lives even better.