

GUIDED EXERCISE

If Poetry Filled Our Mouths:

Expressing Gratitude Around Your Thanksgiving Table
– without feeling awkward, “lame,” trite, or anxious

by Rabbi Debra Orenstein

The following is a prayer of gratitude from the morning liturgy. It is formatted to be read responsively around your Thanksgiving table, or everyone present can offer the entire prayer out loud, together.

If poetry filled our mouths as water fills the sea
and if joy flooded our tongues like its countless waves.

If our lips offered praise as vast as the expanse of the heavens
and if our eyes shined like the sun and the moon

If we could soar with arms like an eagle's wings
and if we had legs to travel effortlessly, with the speed and
grace of a deer

*Even then our faculties could not suffice to thank You, Adonai our
God and God of our ancestors,*
or to praise and bless Your name,

*for even one of the billions and trillions of daily kindnesses and
frequent blessings*
that You have granted to our ancestors and to us.

*

You can follow the spirit of this prayer in several ways outlined on the following pages:

1. Recognizing that we can never fully express our gratitude, what is *one thing* you can focus on, to give thanks for, and which faculty or blessing allows you to recognize and appreciate it?

Give your answer, and then elaborate about the meaning of that faculty or blessing in your life. Examples:

- a. Health is the focus of my gratitude, and yoga allows me to recognize and appreciate it. Let me tell you about this amazing yoga teacher to whom I am eternally grateful....
 - b. My mentor's generosity is the focus of my gratitude, and humility allows me to recognize and appreciate it. I don't mean false humility ("look who thinks she's nothing!"); I mean that I really had to admit that I don't know things, and that admission freed me, even as it opened the door to so much learning and blessing. For example, ...
 - c. My children are the focus of my gratitude, and patience helps me to enjoy them. I don't allow my kids to behave badly, but I am endlessly and effortlessly patient with them over small annoyances (some of which would provoke me to be short with other people). It is a gift that when they were born, a great patience was born in me. Because I am so thankful for that, I would like to spread it, by being more patient with everyone...
2. How do you express gratitude with different parts of your body? Demonstrate, rather than describe, at the table. Examples:
 - a. My hands give and receive. (Demonstrate with a back massage or carry a tzedakah box to your Thanksgiving table.)
 - b. My arms hug. (Ask for volunteers with whom you can demonstrate.)
 - c. My eyes tell my children that I am grateful to be their dad. (Whether they are teens or toddlers, find their eye level and demonstrate.)
 3. Where in your body do you receive gratitude? After each person shares, pause and invite others present to experience what they describe. Examples:
 - a. When I breathe in deeply and intentionally, I can imagine that I am taking blessings in through my lungs as they inflate in my chest. (Everyone takes a deep breath.)

- b. I can literally feel my heart swell with gratitude sometimes. (Everyone focuses on their chest and/or recalls a memory of when they had the same sensation.)
 - c. I feel it as a tingle on my skin. (Everyone focuses for a moment on their skin. Remember when you had goose bumps because life was so wonderful?)
4. Which animals most inspire gratitude in you, and why? Examples:
- a. Dolphins – I remember how they embraced me when I swam with them once.
 - b. Puppies – the sense of unconditional love and joy is heartwarming – and contagious.
 - c. Parrots – their gorgeous colors, speech, and longevity fill me with awe.
5. Write your own group version of this prayer. Distribute index cards. Each person writes one analogy on a card, using *“if”* and *“then”* language, just as the original does.

If you have some folks who will be uncomfortable with writing seriously, it's OK to allow humor, too. When everyone is finished, you can sort the cards to create a group poem, or just shuffle the cards and read them in random order. The first way will be more pleasing and polished, but the second has the advantage of random blessings and juxtapositions.

As an added bonus, you can then play the game of guessing who wrote which line.

- a. Examples: If I could raise my voice with a sound as arresting and haunting as a shofar, I would still never be able to convey my gratitude.
- b. If I could roar like a lion, majestically proclaiming divine Majesty, my voice would still be inadequate to the task of praise.
- c. If I could calculate with the speed of the fastest mainframe, I could never count my blessings.
- d. If I were as deep as the deep dish apple pie I just put away, I would still not be able to bless God.