

Dayenu - The Importance of Gratitude

Contributed by [The Telling By Mark Gerson](#)

Source: The Telling

The first thing about “Dayenu”: It is a magnificent song. We have discussed the intimate connection of music and memory, and “Dayenu” demonstrates it. Its words and its lyrics are among the most recognized parts of any Seder. But it is the familiar things, those that we think we know, that often require the most investigation.

An initial look at the content of “Dayenu” should arouse curiosity. We sing that if God had split the sea but not led us through to dry land, it would have been enough for us. But we would have drowned. We sing that if he had led us through to dry land but not drowned our oppressors, it would have been enough for us. But the Egyptians would have enslaved and/or killed us. We sing that if God had provided for our needs in the desert for forty years but did not feed us manna, it would have been enough for us.

But we would have starved. How does that work? Why are we effectively expressing gratitude for something that would have ended in death?

Read or sung in a vacuum, that dispositive question leads to only one answer: We shouldn't be! However, nothing about “Dayenu” occurs in a vacuum. Instead, it comes immediately after Rabbi Akiva shows us why it is better to count more miracles. Rabbi Akiva shows us why we should count many miracles, and “Dayenu” expresses how we should do so. The success of gratitude, the defining quality of the Jew, requires both the idea and the execution. So the authors of the Haggadah give us the section on miracles followed immediately by “Dayenu.”

Rabbi David Fohrman shows how “Dayenu” is the ancient Jewish expression of the modern scientific discovery of irreducible complexity. This term irreducible complexity was invented by Professor Michael Behe, who describes it as “a single system of several interacting parts, and where the removal of any one of the parts causes the system to cease functioning.”

How do we express our gratitude for gifts of irreducible complexity— to our parents for creating and sustaining us or to God for doing the same with that and everything else . . . among other things? In exactly the same way as “Dayenu” instructs. It is by showing appreciation for every component that we express gratitude for the system as a whole.

So does it make sense outside of this context to say that if he had split the sea for us but had not led us through to dry land, it would have been enough for us? No, we would have drowned. Inside the concept of irreducible complexity, the answer is different. The splitting of the sea was meaningless by itself. But it was not by itself. It was an indispensable part of the system working. We should be grateful for it as if our lives depended on it— because they did.