

"Hakarat Hatov (Being Thankful)"¹
דבר תורה (sermon) for Rosh Hashanah Day 1 5778/2017
Rabbi Noah Gradofsky

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Grey material omitted from spoken presentation.

(singing)

I see skies of blue and clouds of white
The bright blessed day, the dark sacred night
And I think to myself what a wonderful world

. . .

Yes, I think to myself, what a wonderful world²

In general, I think, people don't take enough time to recognize all that is good in the world. Perhaps we get caught up with the first few minutes of the nightly news or the headlines of the papers. Sometimes, I think, we tend to approach the high holiday season in the same way. This is, after all, the penitential season, the season when we are supposed to review our lives with fear of divine judgment and see how we can improve. And so, we focus on what is wrong, rather than what is right.

But the truth is, Rosh Hashanah is not designed for melancholy and disappointment. In fact, it is a celebration. The Torah portion we read today is not about divine punishment but the divine gift of a child given by God to Abraham and Sarah. The Haftarah continues the theme by telling of the birth of Samuel to Channah, and the mainstay of the Haftarah is Channah's prayer of thanksgiving. The Talmud teaches that the Musaf Amidah we will be reciting shortly is designed with 9 blessings based on the 9 times that Channah said God's name in her prayer of thanksgiving.³ And so, it seems, our focus on Rosh Hashanah should not be on disappointment and dread but on thanksgiving and appreciation.

With that thought in mind, I would like to talk today about the mitzvah of הכרת הטוב (Hakarat Hatov) – the mitzvah of expressing appreciation - and I'd like to suggest that Hakarat Hatov is, in fact, an excellent tool for the penitential season.

¹ There is a source sheet on hakarat hatov by Rabbi Joshua Flug at <http://download.yutorah.org/2009/1148/739064.doc>. This was very helpful in formulating this d'var Torah. I also express appreciation to Rabbi Binyamin Marwick, whose sermon some time ago was an inspiration to write this sermon.

² "What a Wonderful World," written by Bob Thiele (as "George Douglas") and George David Weiss and first recorded by Louis Armstrong and released in 1967. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/What_a_Wonderful_World (accessed 9/10/17).

³ תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות דף כט עמוד א
הני תשע דראש השנה כנגד מי? אמר רבי יצחק דמן קרטיגנין: כנגד תשעה אזכרות שאמרה חנה בתפלתה, דאמר מר: בראש השנה נפקדה שרה רחל וחנה.

Jewish thought recognizes how very important it is to appreciate the blessings that are bestowed upon us and to express that appreciation. The Sefer Hachinuch, a 13th century volume that explains the details of each mitzvah in the Torah and their significance, explains the importance of expressing thankfulness in relation to a number of mitzvot, including the mitzvah of honoring one's parents:

One of the reasons (lit: roots) of this mitzvah is that it is fitting for a person to recognize and act kindly to those who have done kindness toward that person . . . And one should internalize that one's father and mother are the reason for one's being in the world . . . for they brought him/her into the world and also toiled on his/her behalf in many ways during one's youth. And when one establishes this attitude in one's heart, it will also lead to recognizing the goodness of God, blessed is He, who is his/her cause and the cause of his ancestors back to Adam . . . and one should consider in one's heart how fitting it is to be fastidious in the service of the Blessed One.⁴

משרשי מצוה זו, שראוי לו לאדם שיכיר ויגמול חסד למי שעשה עמו טובה . . . ושיתן אל לבו כי האב והאם הם סיבת היותו בעולם . . . כי הם הביאוהו לעולם, גם יגעו בו כמה יגיעות בקטנותו. וכשיקבע זאת המדה בנפשו יעלה ממנה להכיר טובת האל-ברוך הוא, שהוא סיבתו וסיבת כל אבותיו עד אדם הראשון. . . ויערוך במחשבתו כמה וכמה ראוי לו להזהר בעבודתו ברוך הוא.⁴

The Sefer Hachinuch expresses the importance of establishing an attitude of thankfulness. This attitude allows us to understand how much we have benefitted from the kindness of others and our obligation to repay that kindness. Because our parents brought us into this world and exerted so much effort on our behalf, we are obligated to honor and take care of them. Because of all the good that God has bestowed on us, we are inspired to live our lives in service of God.

The Torah commands that a certain thanksgiving declaration be made when one brings first fruits to the Holy Temple.⁵ Sefer Hachinuch explains that it is not only important to be thankful, but it is also important to express thankfulness:

One of the reasons (lit: roots) of this mitzvah is that one excites his consciousness and engraves the truth in one's heart through the force of his mouth. Therefore . . . it is fitting to excite one's heart with the words of one's mouth and [thereby] to internalize that everything has come to him from the Master of the Universe.⁶

משרשי המצוה, לפי שהאדם מעורר מחשבותיו ומצייר בלבבו האמת בכח דברי פיו, על כן . . . ראוי לו לעורר לבבו בדברי פיהו ולחשוב כי הכל הגיע אליו מאת אדון העולם . . .⁶

Through prayer and performing of mitzvot, we express Hakarat Hatov, appreciation, for God's creating the world, for bestowing upon us the privilege to inhabit it, and for sustaining us within this world. By expressing this appreciation, we inspire ourselves to observe the Torah, God's blueprint for making ourselves and the world of God's creation even better.

⁴ Sefer Hachinuch Mitzvah 33. ספר החינוך מצוה לג 4.

⁵ Deuteronomy 21:1-11

⁶ Sefer Hachinuch Mitzvah 606. ספר החינוך מצוה תרו 6.

In Exodus, God tells Moses to have Aaron strike the water with Moses's staff in order to begin the plague of blood and frogs.⁷ Rabbi Tanchum explains in the midrash that God said to Moses, “המים ששימרוך בשעה שהושלכת ליאור, לא ילקו על ידך” – the water that guarded you when you were cast into the river (i.e. when Moses as a baby was cast into the river) should not be struck by your hand.⁸ Similarly, Rabbi Tanchum explains, Aaron is instructed to strike the earth with Mose's staff⁹ rather than Moses doing so, because the earth protected Moses by covering up the body of the Egyptian taskmaster whom Moses had killed.¹⁰ The obvious question is: why should it matter if a person expresses appreciation to an inanimate object? Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler writes in *Michtav Me'Eliyahu*¹¹ that while it may not matter to the inanimate object, it certainly affects our own thinking. Internalizing an attitude of appreciation and making it a habit in our lives is so important that one should express appreciation even to inanimate objects.

In an article in the *New York Times* called “How to Get the Wealthy to Donate,” Ashley V. Whillans, Elizabeth W. Dunn, and Eugene M. Caruso write about a number of studies that demonstrated that not only do wealthy people tend to be more selfish, so do their children:

⁷ 7:19, 8:1.

⁸

שמות רבה (שנאן) פרשת וארא פרשה י'
י, ד ויאמר ה' אל משה אמר אל אהרן נטה את ידך במטך [על הנהרת] (שמות/ ח'). אמר ר' תנחום: אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא למשה: המים ששימרוך בשעה שהושלכת ליאור, לא ילקו על ידך

⁹ Exodus 8:12,

¹⁰

שמות רבה (שנאן) פרשת וארא פרשה י'
י, ז ויאמר ה' אל משה אמר אל אהרן נטה את מטך והך את עפר הארץ [והיה לכנים] (שמות/ ח'). אמר ר' תנחום: אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא, העפר שהגין עליך כשהרגת את המצרי, שנאמר: ויטמנהו בחול (שמות/ ב'), אינו דין שילקה על ידך. לפיכך לקו אלה ג' מכות על ידי אהרן.

¹¹ Please note that I did not have access to the full text of this work and relied on the description of this piece found in Rabbi Joshua Flug's work at <http://download.yutorah.org/2009/1148/739064.doc>.

יסוד גדול ומקיף בכחות הנפש של האדם מתגלה לנו בזה: כל מדות הנפש מושפעות ונספעות על ידי הרגש. ולא רק על ידי השכל. לכן אם אין אנו מכירים טובה לדומם שנחננו ממנו. וכל שכן אם אנחנו מבזים אותו. נפגע הרגש. שאינו מגיב רק בהתאם להוקי ההגיון. הרגש של בעל מעלת החסד. שרוצה אך לתת ולהנות אחרים. אסיר תודה הוא לכל אשר הפיק ממנו הנאה. בכל צורה שהיא. ואפילו לדומם. והכלל הוא: פגיעה ברגש משפיעה באופן ישיר על המדות. וממילא נפגמת מדת הכרת הטוב.
אף שהשכל צופה למרחקים -- כחכם הרואה את הנולד -- דון על הכאת היאור לפי התכלית המסובבת על ידי זה. שהיא קדוש ה', לא כן הרגש הניזון מהמתרחש בהוה. ומושפע ממה שהעינים רואות בחוש -- מעשה ההכאה גרידא. נמצא. שעל ידי הפגיעה ברגש על ידי מעשה זכאכה. היתה עלולה להפגם במשהו מדת הכרת הטוב של משה רבנו; והרי מדה זו היא כלי חשוב לעבודת ה'; לכן צריך האדם לעשות כל השתדלות לרכוש מדה זו בשלמות. כי על ידה ילמד להכיר את גדולת חסדו יתברך עם כל הבריאה, ועל ידה ידבק בקב"ה. וכפי שיעור דבקוה ויכל להנות מיוו שכנתו בעולם הבא.

Rabbi Flug references Rashi regarding Moshe and striking the earth and Nile. I have decided to reference some of the midrashim that are the source of Rashi's comments.

[F]or example, preschoolers were told that they had earned enough tokens for “a really great prize.” They could keep the tokens for themselves or share the tokens with children at a local hospital who were too sick to come to the lab. Children from wealthier families kept more tokens for themselves.¹²

Similarly:

[College] [s]tudents from well-off families thought people should donate a smaller percentage of their annual income. And across a wide range of ages, wealthy adults tended to share less of what they had with others.¹³

One reason for these differences, the authors suggest, is wealthy people tend to have a “mindset of self-sufficiency.”¹⁴ They explain:

Consider: If you don’t have much money, you have to ask your friends and family to help you move your belongings from one apartment to another — which means you will probably have to help them when they move. But if you have money, you are likely to leave your friends and family out of it and hire professional movers. Over time, such experiences enable wealthier people to more easily embrace notions of independence and personal control over life. Less affluent people, meanwhile, must stay attuned to others’ needs and goals in order to satisfy their own.

This is one of several reasons why it is important to remember and articulate how dependent each of us is on the grace of God and the kindness of others. Doing so will help us keep attuned to the needs of others and willing to care for the fulfillment of those needs. Expressing appreciation might also help inspire those who are less charitable in general to be more charitable.

¹² https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/12/opinion/sunday/how-to-get-the-wealthy-to-donate.html?mcubz=3&_r=0 (permalink: <https://nyti.ms/2qaT3Rz>)

¹³ Id.

¹⁴ Id.

The authors of the *New York Times* article note how those who are more attuned to a sense of self-reliance were most likely to give when the opportunity to do so was framed as an opportunity for individual achievement rather than for achievement of common goals, for instance, when they were invited “to be a life saver” rather than “to save a life together.”¹⁵ Therefore, it seems, that if we emphasize for people what they have achieved through their kindness – what impact they have had on our lives - perhaps this will inspire their kindness in the future. Now, you may say that we shouldn’t encourage people to do good deeds by preying on their interest in self-importance, but in the Babylonian Talmud Rav says, “ לעולם יעסוק אדם בתורה ובמצוה, אפילו שלא לשמה, שמתוך - אלא לשמה - בא לשמה performance of *mitzvah*,¹⁶ even not for its own sake, i.e. with some ulterior motive, because from performing *mitzvah* not for its own sake, one comes to perform *mitzvah* for its own sake.”¹⁷ Or, as the authors of the *Times* article quote in the name of behavioral scientist Christopher Bryan, “We’re often so focused on getting people to do the right thing for what we think is the right reason, we forget we just need to get them to do the right thing.”¹⁸

While we’re talking about helping to encourage people through expressing the impact of their deeds, it is important to realize that people don’t always understand how much positive impact they have, and reminding them of this may help encourage them to do good deeds in the future. When we express appreciation to someone, we reinforce that what he or she did, perhaps even the more trivial things, really can have a tremendous impact and hopefully this can help inspire more and more good deeds.

I’ll give two examples. I remember hearing many years ago from a congregant who had lost her mother about the shiva visits she received. The most interesting part of the conversation was about how much she appreciated the visits from members of her synagogue whom she knew the least – the casual acquaintances whom she had perhaps encountered from time to time at synagogue services and events. She explained that it was very meaningful how the entire community came out for her and to know just how many people really cared in her time of need.

I’ll give an example from when I was in college. There was a short-order chef in a cafeteria I went to. Nice guy. Actually, his name was Guy. For the two minutes it took me to get my tuna melt, or whatever else, we would chat a bit. I’m not sure if he even knew my name. To him, I was simply “Mets fan!” We weren’t best friends, but he was a good guy that I saw most days. Unfortunately, Guy was the victim of a mugging. He was shot several times and critically injured outside a grocery. I got an e-mail about this from the college. It happened that I was home for Thanksgiving and that Guy was in a hospital not too far from my parent’s home, and so I went out to visit Guy. He was still in ICU, with lots of tubes all around and unable to speak. I think I stayed for about two minutes. Really, I didn’t think that much of it. It was just a couple of minutes. Then, a month or

¹⁵ Id.

¹⁶ In context, perhaps this term should be translated as “good deed” rather than its base meaning of commandment.

¹⁷ Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 105b.

¹⁸ Supra footnote 12.

two later I was reading the college bulletin, and there was an article written by Guy, talking about how a few of his customers from the cafeteria had come to visit him in the hospital. He described how tough it was for him after he was shot. All the pain, all the difficulty. He wrote about how he really wasn't sure whether the struggle to live was worth it until he got those visits from a few of us. He described what it meant for him to know that his life mattered, that what he did mattered to people, that people cared. At the time I didn't think much about those two minutes I spent in that hospital. It was something nice to do. It turned out, it was two minutes that had a big part in changing the world for two people. I now think back to those two minutes as perhaps the most precious two minutes of my entire life. And you can be certain that because of Guy's article, because he took the time to express Hakarat Hatov, I feel a little extra push at my back as I consider when and how to do something nice for someone else. By the way, it strikes me that my parents drove me to the hospital that day. Did I ever properly thank them for that ride? Have I expressed to them how what to them might have been a simple car ride had such a profound impact not only on their son, but also on someone whom they may never have met? And, by the way, Guy mentioned that these visits let him know that people appreciated what he did. And the truth is, we did. Guy was well liked. He made a difference in a lot of people's "every day." He went above and beyond flipping burgers and melting cheese on tuna and provided a consistent friendly face for so many of us. It's amazing how big a difference little things can make, and how, sometimes, what goes around can come around in beautiful ways.

As a final thought about Hakarat Hatov, I would suggest that there is room to have a form of Hakarat Hatov towards ourselves. In Deuteronomy we have the ודוי מעשר – a "confession" regarding bringing tithes in which the person makes a declaration about all the correct things the person did with the tithes:

I removed the sanctified [food] from my house and also gave of it to the Levite, the stranger, and the widow in accordance with all the commandments with which you commanded me, I did not miss any of your mitzvot nor did I forget. . . .¹⁹

בערתי הקדש מן הבית וגם נתתיו ללוי ולגר ליתום ולא למנה ככל מצותך אשר צויתני, לא עברתי ממצותיך ולא שכחתי¹⁹

Rabbi Marc Angel writes about how this commandment tells us that it is important not only to confess our sins, but also to realize our achievements. Rabbi Angel writes:

The fact that the Torah commands a Vidui Maaser provides us with an important balance to the Vidui of our sins. Religious life demands both types of confession: the recognition of our sins and the commitment to repent; but also, the recognition of our virtues, and the commitment to live as positively and honestly as possible.²⁰

¹⁹ Deuteronomy 26:13.

²⁰ <https://www.jewishideas.org/confessing-our-virtues-thoughts-parashat-ki-tavo-september-5-2009>

Appreciating our achievements remind us of what we are capable and can inspire us to replicate and increase those good deeds in the future.

As we go through the Ten days of repentance, let's put as much focus on what has gone wrong as on what has gone right. As we daven Musaf, let's reflect not only on prayer as asking for repentance, but also on prayer as thanksgiving. Give thanks to God for the gift of your life and the opportunity to share your gifts with others. As you go through the next week, think about all the kindnesses that people have done for you and take the opportunity to express your thanks to those people. Look out for the opportunity to thank the stranger who extended you even a small kindness. Use some of your time to reflect on the many things that you believe you have gotten right in your life and to commit to redoubling your efforts in those areas.

Sometimes it's easy to look at the world or even at our own lives and get depressed. There is a lot of hatred and tragedy out there. And if you only listened to the first five minutes of the evening news or just read the front page of the paper, you would think that that's all there is. But what if we judged more of our world based on the stories buried at the end of the news broadcast – the "human interest" stories that tell us about so many people doing amazing and inspirational things? What if as much as we lamented the acts of violence in the world we celebrated the thousands of people and millions of charitable dollars that rushed in to places like Houston and Florida and now Puerto Rico? What if at the same time we decried hatemongers marching in Charlottesville²¹ we celebrated the 40,000 people who marched in Boston in protest of that hatred.²² What if we looked at the world in terms of the many kindnesses that have been bestowed upon us by our family and friends, and even by complete strangers, and strove to join in that chorus of good deeds?

Let's work to get into the habit of thankfulness, so that 24 hours a day, 354 days or so a Jewish year, we are attuned to and ready to express our appreciation for the many gifts we receive and hopefully to repay some of those gifts in the form of dedication to Torah, mitzvot, and good deeds. May our thanksgiving be an inspiration to ourselves and to others. May we all be privileged to join in with Louis Armstrong's song:

(singing)
I see skies of blue and clouds of white
The bright blessed day, the dark sacred night
And I think to myself what a wonderful world
...
Yes, I think to myself, what a wonderful world.

²¹ See e.g. <https://nyti.ms/2vs7HWI>.

²² See e.g. <https://nyti.ms/2vagMQx>.