

## GRATITUDE IS THE FOUNDATION OF ALL CHARACTER TRAITS

In his introduction to *Sha'ar Avodas Ha'Elokim*, the *Chovas Halevavos* writes that *hakaras hatov*, gratitude, is the foundation of all character traits. *Hakaras hatov* is most important because someone who lacks gratitude will often experience challenges in other *middos* as well. This article will present eight ideas relating to *hakaras hatov*.

### Gratitude is a Core Aspect of Jewish Identity

The Jewish people are called “Yehudim,” which is rooted in the word *hoda'ah*, to give thanks. The very essence of being Jewish is to be grateful. *Hoda'ah* also means admission. We use the term *modeh b'miktzas* to describe someone who admits that he owes a portion of the total claim. Saying “thank you”

sometimes requires admission; we must make ourselves vulnerable and admit that we owe a debt of gratitude to someone else, even in situations where we feel that the favor wasn't needed or that we could have done it on our own.

We often talk about Jewish pride. In today's times, in many places, we are blessed to walk the streets without having to hide our Jewish identity. There are even situations where denying our Jewish identity and pretending we belong to another religion would be tantamount to idol worship (see *Yoreh De'ah* 157). What does it mean to identify as being Jewish? From a certain perspective, “*ani Yehudi*,” which translates as “I am Jewish” means that I am someone who is grateful to Hashem and grateful to others, because the essence of a Yehudi is the trait of *hakaras hatov*.

### No Statute of Limitations

There is no “statute of limitations” on *hakaras hatov*. Even if circumstances change or much time has passed, there is still an obligation of *hakaras hatov*. We find that Avraham Avinu, after going down to Egypt during a famine, returns on the same route:

וְאַבְרָם כָּבֵד מְאֹד בַּמִּקְנֵהוּ בַכֶּסֶף וּבַזָּהָב. וַיָּלֶךְ לְמִסְעָיו מִנֶּגֶב וְעַד בֵּית אֵל עַד הַמְּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר הָיָה שָׁם אֹהֶלָה בְּתַחֲלָה בֵּין בֵּית אֵל וּבֵין הָעֵי.  
*Now Abram was very rich in cattle, silver, and gold. And he proceeded by stages from the Negev as far as Bethel, to the place where his tent had been formerly, between Bethel and Ai.*

### Bereishis 13:2-3

Rashi comments:

כשחזר היה לן באכסניו של ה' בהן כשהלך לשם. למד דרך ארץ שלא ישנה אדם מאכסניו שלו.

When he returned, he slept in the same inns that he slept in when he went there. This teaches us proper values that one should not switch to a different inn. When Avraham Avinu went down to Egypt, there was a famine. He had no money, and he must have stayed at the “one-star motels.” On the way back, he was wealthy, and he had a lot of cattle to take care of. He could have easily justified spending more money on nicer, roomier accommodations. However, because he had *hakaras hatov* to those innkeepers, he made sure to stay at the same inns on his return from Egypt. *Hakaras hatov* doesn’t go away because circumstances change. There is no “statute of limitations.”

### **Hakaras Hatov is not Based on Quid Pro Quo**

The concept of *quid pro quo* is that A does a favor for B and then B repays in kind with a different favor. This is not what *hakaras hatov* is about. We aren’t discharged from our obligation of *hakaras hatov* just because we did something for someone who did a favor for us. In fact, the Torah states:

לֹא יָבֹא עִמּוֹנֵי וּמוֹאָבִי בְּקֹהֶל ה' גַּם דּוֹר עֲשִׂירִי  
 לֹא יָבֹא לָהֶם בְּקֹהֶל ה' עַד עוֹלָם. עַל דְּבַר אֲשֶׁר  
 לֹא קָדְמוּ אֶתְכֶם בְּלָחֶם וּבִמַּיִם בְּדַרְוֹ בְּצִאֲתְכֶם  
 מִמִּצְרָיִם וְאֲשֶׁר שָׁכַר עֲלֵיךְ אֶת בְּלָעַם בֶּן בְּעוֹר  
 מִפְּתוֹר אֲרָם נְהָרִים לְקַלְלָךְ.

*No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted into the congregation of the Lord; none of their descendants, even in the tenth generation, shall ever be admitted into the congregation of the Lord, because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey after you left Egypt, and because they hired Balaam son of Beor, from Pethor of Aram-naharaim, to curse you.*

**Devarim 23:4-5**

The Ramban explains:

והנראה אלי כי הכתוב הרחיק שני האחים האלה שהיו גמולי חסד מאברהם שהציל אביהם ואמם מן החרב והשבי (בראשית יד טז) ובזכותו שלחם השם מתוך ההפכה (שם יט כט) והיו חייבין לעשות טובה עם ישראל והם עשו עמהם רעה האחד שכר עליו בלעם בן בעור והם המואבים והאחד לא קדם אותם בלחם ובמים כאשר קרבו למולו.

*It appears to me that Scripture banned these two brothers [Ammon and Moab, sons of Lot — from the congregation of Israel] because they were the beneficiaries of the loving-kindness of Abraham who saved their father and mother from the sword and captivity and, by virtue of Abraham’s merit, G-d sent them out of the midst of the overthrow [of Sodom] — hence they were obligated to do good to Israel and instead they did them evil. One of them [the Moabites] hired Balaam the son of Beor against Israel, and one [the Ammonites] did not meet them with bread and water as they approached their territory.*

**Ramban, Devarim 23:5**

The Ramban’s comments need to be understood in the context of another comment of the Ramban (Bereishis 19:29) that Avraham had *hakaras hatov* toward Lot for accompanying him when he left Charan. This is why Avraham risked his life to save Lot. Yet the Torah doesn’t assume that the debts of gratitude are completed — Lot accompanied Avraham and Avraham saved Lot — rather each one must be grateful to the other forever. Since the descendants of Lot ended the cycle of *hakaras hatov*, we can’t allow them to fully join our nation.

### **Hakaras Hatov and the Key to Techiyas Hameisim**

The Gemara, *Ta’anis* 2a, states:

אמר ר' יוחנן: ג' מפתחות בידו של הקב"ה שלא

נמסרו ביד שליח. ואלו הן: מפתח של גשמים ומפתח של חיה ומפתח של תחיית המתים.

*Rav Yochanan said: Three keys are in the hand of the Holy One, Blessed be He, and are not given over to an emissary, and they are: the key to rain, the key to childbirth and the key to revival of the dead.*

Tosafos point out that while the keys were never given over to anyone on a long-term basis, two people received the keys to *techiyas hameisim* (reviving the dead) on a temporary basis: Eliyahu Hanavi (Melachim I ch. 17) and Elisha Hanavi (Melachim II ch. 4).

How did these two people — of all the righteous people in Tanach — merit receiving the key? If we look at both stories and what led to the great miracle of *techiyas hameisim*, we find that both of them were recipients of hospitality. Both Eliyahu (Melachim I 17:20) and Elisha (Melachim II 4:13) expressed their debt of gratitude toward their hosts. Perhaps in the merit of their *hakaras hatov*, they were the lone recipients of the key of *techiyas hameisim*.

### **Hakaras Hatov forced Moshe Rabbeinu to Reinterpret Hashem’s Commandment**

When it was time for the Jewish people to wage battle against Midyan, Hashem commands Moshe Rabbeinu to exact revenge against the Midyanites (Bamidbar 31:2). Yet we find that Moshe Rabbeinu appoints Pinchas to lead the battle:

וַיִּשְׁלַח אֹתָם מֹשֶׁה אֶלְפֵי לַמִּטָּה לְצַבָּא אֹתָם  
 וְאֶת פִּינְחָס בֶּן אֱלִעָזָר הַכֹּהֵן לְצַבָּא וְכָלִי הַקֹּדֶשׁ  
 וְהַצִּצְרוֹת הַתְרוּעָה בְיָדוֹ.

*Moshe sent them, a thousand from each tribe and Pinchas the son of Elazar the Kohen with the holy vessels and the trumpets in his hand.*

**Bamidbar 31:6**

The Midrash wonders why Moshe Rabbeinu didn't lead the battle himself and states:

וישלח אותם משה אמר הקב"ה למשה נקם נקמת אתה בעצמך והוא משלח את אחרים אלא מפני שנתגדל בארץ מדין אמר אינו בדין שאני מצר למי שעשה בי טובה.

[The verse states] "Moshe sent them," Hashem told Moshe "go avenge," [meaning] you personally, and he sent others? Rather because he was raised (as a young adult) in the Land of Midyan, [Moshe] said, it is not proper that I should cause suffering to those who were kind to me.

### Bamidbar Rabbah, Matos 22:4

Hashem told Moshe Rabbeinu to do something and he didn't listen! When it comes to character traits, the Rambam, in the first two chapters of *Hilchos Deios*, writes that all traits must be balanced. Even a trait such as anger can be displayed in limited circumstances. If Hashem tells someone to express a certain trait in a way that is normally considered a negative use of that trait, there would be no reason to question Hashem's request. Yet when it comes to *hakaras hatov*, Rav Chaim Shmulevitz, *Sichos Mussar* (5732 no. 32), suggests that the trait is so important that Moshe Rabbeinu felt that he could have the audacity to interpret Hashem's command to "go avenge" as a directive to others and not to Moshe Rabbeinu himself.

### Being Grateful to a Wrongdoer Who Indirectly Caused Good

R. Chaim Shmulevitz shows us another example of the importance of *hakaras hatov*. After Moshe Rabbeinu killed the Egyptian taskmaster who

was beating a Jewish slave, he fled to Midyan, where he encountered a struggle between the daughters of Yisro and some shepherds. Moshe Rabbeinu chased away the shepherds and gave water to Yisro's sheep. When Yisro asks his daughters why they came home earlier than usual that day, they respond:

ותאמרן איש מצרי הצילנו מיד הרעים וגם דלה דלה לנו וישק את הצאן.

They said, an Egyptian man saved us from the shepherds and he drew [water] for us and gave water to the sheep.

### Shemos 2:19

Why did Yisro's daughters refer to Moshe Rabbeinu as an Egyptian? Wasn't he an *Ivri* (a Jew)? The Midrash states:

משל לאחד שנשכו הערוד והיה רץ ליתן רגליו במים נתנן לנהר וראה תינוק אחד שהוא שוקע במים, ושלח ידו והצילו, אמר לו התינוק אילולי אתה כבר הייתי מת, אמר לו לא אני הצלתוך אלא הערוד שנשכני וברחתי הימנו הוא הצילך, כך אמרו בנות יתרו למשה ישר כחך שהצלתנו מיד הרועים, אמר להם משה אותו מצרי שהרגתי הוא הציל אתכם, ולכך אמרו לאביהן איש מצרי, כלומר מי גרם לזה שיבא אצלנו איש מצרי שהרג.

*This is comparable to someone who was bitten by a donkey and ran to the river to wash his legs in the water. When he put his legs in the water, he saw a child drowning and saved the child. The child said to him, "If not for you, I would have died." The man responded, "It wasn't me who saved you but rather the donkey who bit me and chased me away. He saved you." Similarly, when the daughters of Yisro said to Moshe, thank you for saving us, Moshe said, the Egyptian that I killed is the one who saved you. Therefore, they told their father, "An Egyptian man," meaning, who caused him to come to us, the Egyptian man that [Moshe] killed. Shemos Rabbah, Shemos 1:32*

The Egyptian taskmaster was beating a Jewish slave. What he was doing at the time was so evil that it warranted Moshe Rabbeinu killing him. Yet Moshe Rabbeinu's deep sense of gratitude allowed him to see that the Egyptian taskmaster deserved some credit for indirectly causing something good.

### Gratitude must be a Personal Expression

*Chazaras Hashatz*, the Chazzan's Repetition, is a prayer recited by the chazzan on behalf of the whole congregation. Rav Soloveitchik stressed the fact that even though we already fulfilled our personal obligation of reciting the Amidah, *Chazaras Hashatz* is a different type of prayer. It is a *tefillas hatzibbur*, a prayer offered by the whole congregation (see *Nefesh Harav* pp. 124-127). We are supposed to listen to every word of the chazzan (see *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 124:4). Nevertheless, there is one prayer that we recite on our own: *Modim D'rabbanan*. Why don't we follow the normal protocol by listening to the chazzan's recitation of *Modim*? Rav Dovid Avudraham explains:

וכשיגיע ש"ץ למודים וכורע כל העם שוחין ואומרין הודאה קטנה המתחלת כמו כן במודים שאין דרך העבד להודות לרבו ולומר לו אדוני אתה על ידי שליח אלא כל אדם צריך לקבל בפיו עול מלכות שמים ואם יקבל על ידי שליח אינה קבלה גמורה ... אבל בשאר התפלה שהיא בקשה יכול לתבוע צרכיו על ידי שליח.

*When the chazzan reaches Modim and bows, the entire congregation bows and recites a small expression of gratitude, which also begins with the word Modim (we are grateful), because it is not the way of a servant to thank his master and tell him "you are my master" through an*

agent. Rather each person must verbally accept the yoke of Heaven personally and if one uses an agent, it is not a full-fledged acceptance ... However, regarding other prayers that are requests, one may use an agent to request one's needs.

**Sefer Avudraham, Shemoneh Esrei**

## Hakaras Hatov Towards Inanimate Objects

Moshe Rabbeinu was Hashem's emissary to carry out the Ten Plagues and lead the Jewish people out of Egypt. Yet it was his brother, Aharon, who hit the water to initiate the first two plagues and the land to initiate the third. Why? Rashi explains:

לפי שהגן היאור על משה כשנשלוף לתוכו, לפיכך לא לקה על ידו לא בדם ולא בצפרדעים, ולקה על ידי אהרן.

*Because the river had protected Moses when he was cast into it, therefore it was not smitten by him neither at the plague of blood nor at that of frogs, but it was smitten by Aaron.*

**Rashi, Shemos 7:19**

לא היה העפר כדאי ללקות ע' משה, לפי שהגן עליו כשהרג את המצרי ויטמנהו בחול, ולקה על ידי אהרן.

*The dust did not deserve to be smitten by Moses because it had protected him*

when he slew the Egyptian, for "he hid him in the sand"; and it was therefore smitten by Aaron.

**Rashi, Shemos 8:13**

Moshe couldn't hit the river because he was saved by the river and he couldn't hit the land because he was saved by the land. In more recent times, Rav Yisrael Zev Gustman (1908–1991) had the practice of personally watering the bushes of Yeshivas Netzach Yisroel where he served as rosh yeshiva. When his students asked why he insisted on watering the bushes himself, he responded that when he was in Vilna during the Holocaust, he hid in the bushes to save himself from the Nazis. As a way of showing *hakaras hatov*, he wanted to water the bushes personally.

What is this about? What is the point of showing *hakaras hatov* to inanimate objects? The idea is that we are thanking Hashem for providing us with our needs. The inanimate objects are tools that can serve as a reminder for specific events in our lives that we are grateful for.

## Hakaras Hatov and Chanukah

The Gemara, *Shabbos* 21b, tells us that the days of Chanukah were

instituted as days of Hallel and *hoda'ah* (thanksgiving). We may be familiar with Rashi's interpretation of the Gemara that *hoda'ah* refers to the recitation of Al Hanisim. This is the way we normally express our gratitude — through verbal statements.


R. Betzalel Zolty, *Mishnas Yaavetz*, OC no. 73, notes that according to the Riaz and the Rambam, when the Gemara mentions "*hoda'ah*," it does not mean Al Hanisim, but rather the lighting of the candles. The message that emerges from the Riaz and the Rambam is that gratitude is so central to Chanukah that we don't only express our gratitude through words. We express it through action — the mitzvah of lighting candles.


Chanukah is a time for us to focus on gratitude. It is not enough to feel a sense of gratitude toward those who have been kind to us. We must communicate it to them regularly and in a personal way. We also concretize it through our actions, whether it is an expression of *hoda'ah* to Hashem through a mitzvah or using acts of kindness to thank others.

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