

## Parenting from the Parsha- Parshat Va'era- "Cultivating Thanks Within Our Children"

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In this week's parsha, we begin the story of the 10 plagues that Hashem brings upon the Egyptians due to Pharaoh's refusal to let the Jewish people go free. The Torah relates that whereas for most of the plagues, Moshe was the one who initiated the start of the plague, for the first three plagues, his brother Aharon was actually the one who initiated them. Rashi famously quotes the Midrash Shemos Rabbah that the reason Aharon initiated these plagues was because the river protected Moshe when he was placed there as a baby by his mother, and therefore it wasn't appropriate for him to strike the river to start the plagues of blood and frogs. In addition, the dirt of the ground helped Moshe to bury the Egyptian whom he killed in last week's parsha, and therefore it wasn't appropriate for him to hit the ground in order to start the plague of lice. The implication seems to be that Moshe owed a sense of thanks, or Hakarat HaTov, to the river and the dirt, and therefore it wasn't fitting for him to be the one to smite them in order to bring about their respective plagues.

While at first glance, this seems like a nice idea- upon further reflection, there is an obvious question that arises from this Midrash. The river and dirt are both inanimate objects, who are neither bothered by a lack of thanks nor appreciate any Hakarat HaTov that would be directed towards them. So why would Moshe be required to express thanks to objects that wouldn't notice?

The answer appears to be very simple- but also incredibly profound. Of course, Moshe's need to show thanks to the river and dirt was not for the benefit of those inanimate objects, as it didn't impact them in any way. Rather, *Moshe's need to show thanks was for the benefit of Moshe himself*- in order to cultivate within him a sense of gratitude to anyone and anything that helped him throughout his life. After hearing about, and experiencing, the ways that the river and the dirt helped him, Moshe was meant to feel true appreciation for what occurred and gratitude towards all objects that were involved in helping him- to the extent that he simply couldn't get himself to do anything bad towards those objects. This ultimate goal of the Hakarat HaTov was not for giver, but ultimately for the receiver.

In 2018, New York Times bestselling author A.J. Jacobs came up with a fascinating idea- he decided to go on a mission to thank every single person involved in producing his morning cup of coffee- from the workers at the coffee place to the construction workers who pave the road all the way to the farmers in South America who grew the coffee beans. In his resulting book *Thanks a Thousand*, he describes his journey, and according to his website, thereby "reveals secrets about how gratitude can make us all happier, more generous, and more connected." When asked why he began this journey, he explained that he wasn't doing it so that all those people could be thanked- while they appreciated the thanks in the moment, it didn't really have any lasting effect on them. Rather, he did it for himself. He realized that in life, there are so many things that happen that we should be thankful for, but we don't pay attention to them, as we instead focus on the parts of our day that are more challenging. By going on this journey, he began to realize all the various people that are involved in even the simplest aspects of his day- and all the things that have to go right in order for these things to happen. By focusing on this, it

made him a much happier person. Jacobs learned this crucial lesson that Chazal already taught us generations ago.

The concept of Hodaah, of having gratitude and giving thanks, is part and parcel of who we are as Jews. As a nation we are called “Yehudim”, named after Yaakov’s son Yehuda, who was named such by Leah because “now I want to thank Hashem”. There is a common idea in Judaism that a person’s name is an expression of their essence- as such, the fact that we are called Yehudim means part of our essence is to be someone who is grateful, who recognizes and expresses thanks for all that is done for him. As parents, one of our major responsibilities is to raise and educate our children, the next generation, with this overarching sense of hoda’ah.

On one level, as a community we are generally good in this regard. Our communities and schools often educate us from a young age to say “thank you” when someone gives us something or does something for us. I still remember a song that I learned in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade in YNJ that was about saying thank you- the chorus ending with the line “Everything that is done for us, even thanking the driver on the bus”. We make sure that our kids say thank you to bus drivers, waiter- in sum, we make sure to educate our kids to be polite.

On the other hand, while getting our children to be polite and say thank you is certainly important, it is only half the job. We need to make sure that the “thank you” that our kids say is actually an expression of something – and not simply a half-hearted phrase that is said by rote. When we focus on our kids simply saying the words, we are focusing on the correct words being said to the giver, the person who gave them. However, as we have demonstrated, the real goal of Hoda’ah is the impact it has on the receiver, on the person who expresses the thanks. The ultimate goal is not simply to raise children that are polite- but to cultivate within our children a deep sense of gratitude for the things that are done for them, and the importance of recognizing and expressing those thanks. We need to help our children pay attention to the things that happen around them, and the work that is involved in all that is given to them, to be appreciative of it all, and to express that appreciation. Not simply because it is polite, but because by doing so they are tapping into their essence as Jews, and ultimately, it will make them happier people as well.

As a final point- this idea has important religious implications as well. By cultivating this sense of gratitude within our children and encouraging them to recognize in their daily lives the things that are done for them, we also open up a path for our children to develop a deeper connection to Hashem. As Hashem is the source of so much goodness within their lives- the more aware and sensitive they are to all that they receive, the greater awareness they will have of all that Hashem does for them as well.

How do we develop and cultivate this awareness within our children? As with most other things, the best way to do so is by living this middah ourselves and modeling it for our children. The more that we work on ourselves, and strive to recognize the gifts that we receive from G-d and others in our daily lives, the more our children will learn this and hopefully develop the same sensitivities as well.

Rav Hutner, in his Sefer Pachad Yitzchak on Channukah, relays a beautiful idea- he points out that the Hebrew word for “thanks”, the word “hoda’ah”, actually has another meaning as well- “to admit”. Rav

Hutner points out that this isn't by chance- that there is a deep relationship between these two meanings. When a person says thank you to his friend, what he is really doing is admitting to his friend he was lacking something, and that his friend was able to fill that void. As such, all forms of "thank you" really include within them an "admission" that we were lacking something, and we are thankful for that person for filling that lack.

Perhaps this is why it is hard for some people to say thank you- because they have trouble admitting that they are lacking or missing something- they think they have everything and don't need help from anyone. But the beauty of cultivating thanks, within ourselves and our children, is that once we realize that we do depend on others for our existence and our life- be it Hashem or the people around us- then we can grow a greater appreciation and indebtedness to them, and become happier people along the way.

Wishing everyone a Shabbat Shalom!!

Bava Kamma 92b- בירא דשתית מיניה לא תשדי ביה קלא- do not throw a clod of earth into a well that you drank from. After we have quenched our thirst from the refreshing water of a well, it is improper to treat it carelessly or with disdain. Everything that exists in this world is enlivened and given existence by a Divine spark, an extension of Hashem Himself. Jewish consciousness sees that which is domem, 'silent', or seemingly inanimate, as alive in some way. Everything is worthy of respect, especially if it has served us or supported us in some way. The renowned Maggid Rabbi Paysach Krohn relates that when Rav Mordechai Schwab, zt'l, wore out a suit, he wouldn't just throw it away. Rather, he would wrap it up carefully and say to the suit, in Yiddish, Du hust mir goot badint, "You served me well." He would then respectfully donate or dispose of the garment.