

You shall come to whoever will be the Kohen in those days, and you shall say to him, “I declare today to Hashem, your G-d, that I have come to the land.” (26:3)

Once *Eretz Yisrael* was conquered and allocated among the tribes, the farmers were able to take their first ripened fruit to the Sanctuary and present them to the *Kohen* in a ritual which included a moving declaration of gratitude to Hashem. *Hakoras hatov*, gratitude, is one of the most basic *middos tovos*, positive character traits, without which one is not a *mentch*, decent human being. Only a person who is a *makir tov*, one who recognizes and appreciates the good which he receives from others, has a chance of achieving *shleimus*, perfection, in his relationship with Hashem. One who does not acknowledge the plethora of gifts of which he has been the beneficiary cannot properly serve Hashem. Likewise, such a person will also reject the favors he receives from people. Thus, an ingrate has no place in society.

In his commentary to the above *pasuk*, *Rashi* comments, “And you shall say: ‘That you are not an ingrate.’” Why does *Rashi* focus on the negative, underscoring that the individual is not ungrateful? Why not simply say that he is showing his positive gratitude to Hashem? **Horav Eliyahu Baruch Finkel, zl**, derives a profound insight from *Rashi*’s choice of words. It is impossible to really tally up what we owe Hashem. Does anybody have any idea how much we are in His debt just for our daily existence? Thus, to make the statement that we are performing a ritual through which we recognize our debt to Hashem would be ludicrous. We can only say that we are making a feeble attempt to not be an ingrate. This idea is consistent with the verse in *Tefillas Nishmas* which we recite on *Shabbos*: *V’ilu finu malei shirah kayam...* “Were our mouth as full of song as the sea, and our tongue full of joyous song as the multitudes of waves, and our lips as full of praise as the breadth of the heavens... We still could not thank You sufficiently... and to bless Your Name... for even one of the thousand thousand, thousands of thousands and myriad myriads of favors, miracles and wonders that You performed for our ancestors and for us.” When one concentrates on the depth of meaning implied by this *pasuk*, we see how the concept of achieving *hakoras hatov* status *vis-à-vis* Hashem is totally distant from us.

Sadly, the nature of the human being is always to focus on what he still lacks, rather than on what he has already received. Therefore, he is too busy complaining about what he still does not have, rather than offering gratitude for the many benefits of which he has already been the beneficiary. The idea of the cup being half full, rather than half empty, is for most of us a nice cliché, but not a way to view life. The story is told of a *chasid* who came to his *Rebbe* with a list of complaints. “*Rebbe*,” he began, “While it is true that I am blessed with a large family of fifteen children, on the other hand I live in a tiny apartment, unable to properly house my children. I have a decent job, but I simply do not make enough to support my family. What am I to do?”

The *Rebbe* looked at the *chasid* and replied, “Yankel! *Mazel tov* on the large family with which you have been blessed! Also, I am so happy for you that you are among the lucky ones who have

been able to obtain an apartment. There are so many who are not blessed with children, and an apartment is such a luxury today. Additionally, you intimate that you have a job. How fortunate you are! How many people do not even have a roof over their heads, and a job to boot! How fortunate you are!

“My dear Yankel,” the *Rebbe* continued, “I suggest that, from today on, rather than complain about what you feel to be your deficiencies, why not begin to thank Hashem for all your blessings? In due time, you will see that those areas in which you are lacking will suddenly be satisfied.”

Every night, prior to retiring, the **Chafetz Chaim, zl**, would recount the good fortune of which he had been the beneficiary. He had been orphaned at a young age, when it could have been very easy for him to fall victim to despair. He was able to devote his life to the study and dissemination of Torah. His children, sons and sons-in-law were all accomplished Torah scholars. He was so thankful for all of this goodness that he felt the need to share his good fortune with his Benefactor.

The *Chasam Sofer* was once informed by a group of “do gooders” that when his son, the brilliant (soon to be) *K’sav Sofer*, recited the *Bircas HaShachar*, Morning Blessings, he apparently did not recite the blessing of *Shelo asani goy*, “That He did not create me as a gentile.” It was difficult for the *Chasam Sofer* to accept such slander against his son. The next morning, he made it a point to stand next to his son when he recited the *Berachos*, and, lo and behold, he did not recite the blessing of not being created as a gentile. His father immediately asked his son, “Why are you not saying the *brachah*, *shelo asani goy*?”

“Father,” the *K’sav Sofer* replied, “of course I recite the blessing, but, when I arise in the morning, I am so overwhelmed with the joy that Hashem created me as a Jew that I cannot wait to recite the blessing in *shul*. I immediately recite the blessing at home! To be a Jew is the greatest gift from Hashem. How could I wait to reach the *shul* to make my declaration of gratitude?”

We have so many vignettes, stories and Torah thoughts which address the *middah*, attribute, of *hakoras hatov*. I am certain that the reading audience has been inundated with them. This *Shabbos* I heard a wonderful analogy, which I had never heard before. It is inspiring and well-worth repeating. A young woman replete with *middos tovos*, refined character traits, was severely challenged in her quest to achieve matrimony. Sadly, despite her many wonderful attributes, she suffered from a physical challenge that had thus far precluded her ability to find a mate: she was blind. It would require a very special young man who would be willing to overlook her sightlessness in order to focus on the character and personality of this special young woman.

One day, she met “Mr. Right,” a *ben Torah* who looked beyond the superficial and concentrated on the intrinsic, essential person. He knew that she was blind, but, once he spoke to her, he no longer viewed it as an impediment. She was the type of person he was looking for, with whom he was prepared to spend the rest of his life. They soon became engaged, followed by an emotional wedding. A short while after they married, the husband informed his wife of an incredible

discovery. It seemed that a doctor in Cleveland had perfected a surgical procedure during which he was able to transplant healthy eyes successfully into the sockets of a person who had previously been unable to see. The excitement in their home was palpable. The husband immediately purchased a ticket to Cleveland, so that he could speak with the doctor to investigate whether his wife was a candidate for the surgery. Two days later, he returned with the wonderful news: she was a candidate for the surgery. There was, however, one problem: there was a ten-year wait.

The wife had become used to various letdowns in life. Chalk it up to a bad experience, insensitive person, whatever explanation one employed to ameliorate a sad situation. This, however, was too much. So close, yet so far. She finally had hope of experiencing sight for the very first time, to be like everyone else, to enjoy Hashem's world to the fullest. Ten years was a long time to wait, even for hope. She broke down and cried like she never had before. Having the hope that one has waited for so patiently smashed before your eyes is worse than not having any hope to begin with. This woman's hopes had been raised, only to discover that it could be a lifetime before it would be realized.

The husband could not tolerate seeing his wife in such pain. She meant the world to him. He decided to pull out all stops to move his wife to the top of the list. A few days went by, and the husband conveyed to his wife the good news: she had been moved up the list. Surgery was scheduled for that week! The joy was indescribable. Now, for once, there was a chance. True, it would be a dangerous surgery, and nobody was making any promises, but it was the only chance they had.

The day of surgery arrived, and Hashem guided the surgeon's deft hands. The procedure was a remarkable success. At first, she saw blurred images, which increased in clarity, until, for the very first time in her life, she was able to see! (For anyone who has taken the gift of vision for granted, the first-time encounter with the experience of sight is staggering, almost indescribable.) In just a few days, this woman's life changed. She could now look forward to going places, seeing things, enjoying her life as never before. She was so involved with enjoying her good fortune that she did not notice a change in her husband. It was on the day that she was finally leaving the hospital, after having completed weeks of therapy, that she discovered the note on her bed. It was a simple, poignant note from her husband which, upon reading it, sent her whole life into a tailspin, "My dear wife, during our courtship and ensuing marriage, the issue that loomed over our heads had always been our physical impediment. Now that it is behind us, you will see that it was not only you who had been sightless, but that I, too, am blind. I hope that this discovery will not change our relationship, because there is nothing in the world more important to me than you."

Some people can handle such life-altering news better than others. Sadly, this woman, who had throughout her life endured so much physical and emotional challenge, was unable to navigate the turbulent emotions that were crashing down on her from all sides. To have come so far, and then have total triumph evade you can be – and was - devastating. This was too much for this frail

woman who had absorbed so much. She tried to accentuate the positive, but it was not working. She so much wanted to enjoy the new world that had been revealed to her. She wanted out. One morning, a few weeks later, the husband discovered an envelope on his bed. He had someone read it to him and it was not good. Essentially, it was a farewell letter from his wife. She thanked him for being there for her all of these years, but now it was time to move on. She was moving out.

That night, when his wife came home, there was an envelope on her bed. Inside, was the following note. "My dear wife, I thank the Almighty for the time that I shared with you. I do not want to put you out, because you have suffered so much in your life. I am moving out, and I am taking along the wonderful memories of the time that we spent together. I ask only one favor. Please, please take great care of your new eyes. You see, they were mine originally, but, when I saw how devastated you were at being at the bottom of the transplant list, I decided to donate my eyes to you."

A very sad story, but one that plays itself out daily in our lives. Perhaps our stories are not so dramatic, but do we ever bother to ask ourselves: What are we doing for Hashem? How are we repaying Him for everything that He gives us? Are we any different from the wife who, after receiving her husband's eyes, left him, because she wanted to enjoy life – unimpeded , unrestricted and unsuppressed? Whatever we have is from Hashem, Who has given it to us out of His great love. Is fidelity so much to ask for? If we are outraged by the woman's reaction to what her husband did, we might want to take a close look in the mirror.