

Say to Aharon, “Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt.” (7:19)

People are always searching for that magic elixir that will grant them everlasting happiness – and they do not succeed in finding it. They go for therapy sessions and take vacations in the most remote and exotic places in the world, yet the secret continues to elude them. Why? Because they are missing a fundamental point, a crucial lesson about life, human nature, and G-d. Without this point, they will never be truly happy. They are missing the attribute of *hakoras ha'tov*, gratitude. The concept of gratitude is probably the most important lesson a person should internalize and integrate into his psyche. Having successfully done so, the individual will be guaranteed a happy and meaningful life. When a person learns to thank Hashem for the many blessings of life, when he realizes how many more blessings he really has, he becomes filled with joy at being the beneficiary of so much good.

Sometimes we refuse to recognize Hashem's benevolence, because we do not want to accept the responsibility of paying gratitude – especially if part of that gratitude means maintaining a commitment to listen to Him and observe His dictates. For some people, saying thank you is a natural response. For others, pulling teeth would be easier. The inability to express gratitude is one of the reasons that there are so many bitter people. One who does not permit himself to express his appreciation will invariably find fault in every kindness that he receives. Such people make terrible mates and tyrannical parents, and they cannot sustain a friendship. They are so into themselves that they cannot see anyone else. They are never happy, because they do not permit themselves to be.

Throughout the *Torah*, we are taught the significance of *hakoras ha'tov*. In this *parsha*, we see how Hashem did not permit Moshe *Rabbeinu* to strike the Nile River, an act which would initiate the plagues and would further work to catalyze the Jews' liberation from Egypt. As an infant, Moshe was saved by the Nile as he lay in a basket floating in the water. He felt gratitude towards the Nile and could not act towards it ungraciously. He also was not allowed to lift his staff over the rivers, canals and reservoirs or strike the earth for the plagues of frogs and lice, for a similar reason. The earth had protected Moshe when he buried the Egyptian that he had killed. These incidents seem far-fetched as far as gratitude is concerned. Yet, Hashem wanted to train Moshe's subconscious to the fact that one must always repay kindness to anyone, for anything, anytime.

Gratitude takes many forms. For some, it can change their lives; for others, it can save their lives. Let me share with you two such stories. One is about a young man who not only has become observant, but goes out of his way to use his expertise to benefit the Jewish community – all because of *hakoras ha'tov*. It occurred a few years ago, when this young man, whom we will refer to as D.G., was living a totally assimilated lifestyle in New York. He had no understanding of *Yiddishkeit*, something which did not really concern him very much. His life revolved around one thing – music. In fact, at the time the incident took place, he was preparing to leave the States for

Paris to pursue his musical studies.

It was a Sunday afternoon, and he was walking down Kings Highway in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn. Suddenly he heard a loud crash, followed by the screech of brakes. He looked up at the source of the noise. There in the street, covered with blood, was an elderly rabbi who had been hit by a car. He rushed over to his side and attempted to speak to him, but there was no response. He stayed with him and held his hand until an ambulance came to administer first aid.

As the rabbi was being lifted onto the stretcher, D.G. noticed that his lips were moving. It appeared that he wanted to say something to him. So he leaned down and bent his ear close to his lips, so that he could hear what he was trying to say. What he heard shocked him, "Sonny, are you Jewish?" the rabbi asked in broken English.

"Yes, Pop," he answered. "I am Jewish."

"Sonny," the rabbi whispered in obvious pain and with great difficulty, "you must go to Jerusalem and study Torah."

When D.G. heard these words, it literally shocked him into reality. Here was this rabbi, suffering from multiple fractures, his body bloodied and bruised. Despite his intense pain, all he cared about was that the young man who stood over him would go to *Eretz Yisrael* to study Torah! The experience transformed D.G. forever. He realized that the man who lay in his arms was no mere man. He was a saint, so committed to his faith that he was able to transcend his suffering and pain just to reach out to another Jew. The rabbi was G-d's messenger, sent to convey His message to D.G: "Come home. This is where you belong. Do not waste your life. Learn Torah."

D.G. listened to the message, and a few days later went to *Eretz Yisrael* and enrolled in a *yeshivah*. He has not returned to the States. He remembers only too well to whom he owes his newly-found life – and D.G. will never forget.

A second incident demonstrates how *hakoras ha'tov* saved a life.

M.G. used to work as a newspaper reporter. Every day, on his way home from work, he would stop by the hospital and visit a number of the sick people and read to them.

One day, he wrote an article exposing someone's fraudulent activities. Their response to his article was to take out a contract on his life. The following week, he arrived home one night about two o'clock in the morning. A big, tall man appeared from the side of the house and asked, "Are you M.G.?" He nodded.

The man told him that he had offended a very powerful man who had put out a contract on his life. He explained to M.G. that he was supposed to carry out the contract, but he was able to convince

the mob to rescind the order.

Why did he do this? He recounted the following story: “While I was in prison, my mother wrote me about a man, a reporter, who would visit her and read to her once a week. I found out that it was you who made my mother feel less lonely. I wanted to meet you. When I found out that there was a contract out against you, I took the contract and made sure that nothing bad would happen to you.”

A man performs a simple gesture of *chesed*, and the beneficiary’s son – one of society’s moral outcasts – repays the kindness in a manner the benefactor never dreamed of. That is *chesed* and *hakoras ha’tov*.