

You shall come to whoever shall 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)

The *mitzvah* of bringing *Bikurim*, the first fruits, is paradigmatic of the *middah*, character trait, of *hakoras hatov*, gratitude. This *middah* is one of the most fundamental principles of human and Heavenly relationships. Indeed, one who is *makir tov*, acknowledges his debt of gratitude to Hashem, even in the areas that affect his interpersonal relationships with people (he understands that what he receives is from Hashem, with people serving as His agency) will ultimately achieve *shleimus*, completion/perfection, in his relationship with Hashem. The nature of man is to focus on what he is still missing, rather than on what he has. In order to reach the pinnacle of *hakoras hatov*, it is critical that one focus on what he has and on what he has received from Hashem. We must stop viewing the glass as half-empty, but rather, as half-full – and place our emphasis on the half that is full.

A well-known story about a *chassid* who complained to his *Rebbe* about his difficult lot in life underscores this idea. “*Rebbe*,” the *chassid* cried out, “I cannot take it any longer. Life has become so difficult to navigate.” “What happened?” asked the *Rebbe*. “Well,” the *chassid* began, “on the one hand, I am blessed with a family of fifteen souls. On the other hand, I have a tiny apartment that would be considered small for a family half our size. *Parnassah*, a livelihood, is obviously very challenging with so many mouths to feed.”

The *Rebbe* listened intently and said, “*Mazel Tov!* I was unaware that you had additions to your family, may you derive much *nachas*, satisfaction, and joy from them. I am so happy that you were able to obtain an apartment. You know how difficult they are to find, and you have a job? Wonderful! Fantastic!

“My dear friend, you are truly a fortunate individual. You have been blessed with so many children, when you are obviously aware that there are a number of *chassidim* who have yet to be blessed with progeny. The fact that you have a roof over your head and a source of livelihood makes you one of our more fortunate *chassidim*. Therefore, my advice to you is to begin by expressing your gratitude to Hashem for all of His munificence. Afterwards, Hashem will bless you in the future. Rather than complain about what you do not yet have, appreciate what you do have now.”

The *Chafetz Cham*, *zl*, would thank Hashem nightly for all that he had the good fortune to receive from Him. He would enumerate everything in detail. Orphaned at a young age, Hashem was with him as he grew up (He is with everyone. The *Chafetz Chaim* acknowledged and appreciated every moment of success as having been orchestrated by the Almighty.) He helped him to study Torah diligently and author a number of Torah classics. He was blessed with sons-in-law who were outstanding *talmidei chachamim*, Torah scholars. This does not mean that his long life was a bed of roses. He, however, ignored the difficulties on which so many others dwell; rather, he focused on

his good fortune.

A young man who was *chozeir b'tshuvah*, “returned home” to religious observance, was wont to relate what courses through his mind every morning when he arises and recites *Modeh Ani*, Thank You Hashem! He thinks through the wonderful gifts that he has been fortunate to have since he became *frum*, observant. He has a loving wife, sons and daughters – all committed to the Torah way of life – in-law children that are likewise (on the same page) committed. He and his family have been blessed with good health. All this goes through his mind, and he is filled with an emotion of thankfulness to Hashem for helping him along the way and giving him so much. Perhaps we should all stop for a moment, and, instead of complaining about how short or unrestful our night's sleep has been, thank Hashem for all that we are fortunate to have.

A new perspective on *hakoras hatov* was taught by *Horav Elya Svei, zl*, to a *talmid*, student, which I take the liberty of sharing. One of the *Rosh Yeshivah's* married students was blessed with a child after years of praying for what so many take for granted. The child was born prematurely and, as a result, suffered from a number of medical issues which required a lengthy stay in the neo-natal intensive care unit of the hospital. As the day for leaving the hospital neared, the student turned to his *Rebbe* for advice on how best to show his and his wife's appreciation to the doctors and nurses who had so ably and lovingly cared for their son. He figured that he would buy something for them. He was surprised when the *Rosh Yeshivah* disagreed.

“Do not buy anything for them,” *Rav Elya* said. When he saw the look of incredulity on his *talmid's* face, he explained, “When Shifra and Puah risked their lives to save the lives of the Jewish newborn, Hashem rewarded them, such that they would see an incredible increase in Jewish births. The mere fact that the Jewish midwives saw blessing in their work was their greatest reward. Therefore, instead of flowers and candy, visit the neo-natal unit every year on your son's birthday. Bring him to visit with the people who so skillfully and devotedly worked with him. This will be the greatest show of gratitude towards them.”

The *talmid* listened. Every year, he celebrated his son's birthday with the neo-natal staff. On the boy's *bar mitzvah*, the father came with invitations for everyone to attend this milestone occasion. A short time later, the director of the department wrote a short note to the parents, “Congratulations! We would like you to know how happy your yearly visits have made us feel. We work day in and day out saving children, without knowing what happens to them once they leave our care. It is nice to know what our devotion has achieved. During the years that you shared your son with us, you made us feel a part of your family and demonstrated your boundless gratitude for our work. Thank you.”