

They had left the city, they had not gone far, and Yosef said to the one in charge of his house... “You shall say to them, ‘Why do you repay evil for good?’” (44:4)

Of all of the messages of rebuke that Yosef could have sent to his brothers, “Why did you repay evil for good?” is the last one you would expect. The most pressing question to be asked was, “Why did you steal my cup?” Instead, Yosef seems to be delivering a *mussar shmuess*, ethical discourse, to his brothers, concerning their jealousy and their turning against him. The *Zera Shimshon* explains that Yosef was implying, “You were so jealous of me, because our father made me a multicolored coat – jealous enough to sell me as a slave! Is this what I deserve? Have you forgotten what my mother, Rachel (*Imeinu*) did for her sister, your mother Leah (*Imeinu*)? It was the antithesis of what you did to me. My mother gave the *simanim*, predestinated signs, that our father, Yaakov (*Avinu*) shared with her, to your mother, to spare her humiliation. Yet, you quickly forgot the debt of gratitude you owe.” Thus, when Yosef demanded, “Why do you repay evil for good?” it was a reference to the good Rachel had done for Leah.

Chazal (*Bereishis Rabbah* 84:18) use the expression, “You sold the son of Rachel” a number of times, rather than the simple, “You sold Yosef” or “You sold your brother.” The *Zera Shimshon* explains that they are underscoring the fact that in addition to the wrong of selling Yosef, there was a grievance against them for their lack of *hakoras hatov*, gratitude, for what Yosef’s mother had done for their mother.

The importance of *hakoras hatov* cannot be overstated. It is an essential *middah*, character trait, that defines a person. One who is not a *makir tov* is simply not a *mentch*, decent human being. We derive from the above an added caveat: *hakoras hatov* applies even if one had not personally/directly benefited from the person. The brothers had not directly benefited from Rachel’s act of kindness. It was their mother who was spared humiliation. Yet, since their aunt reached out to their mother, they owed her son – Yosef.

Horav Yaakov Kamenetzky, *zl*, *Rosh Yeshivah* of Torah Vodaath, was informed that a certain *bachur*, student, was not attending the morning *Shacharis minyan* – despite numerous punishments and threats. Nothing seemed to help. The administration felt that the time had come to mete out a stronger punishment – ejection from the dormitory. They could not permit a student to avail himself of the services provided by the dormitory if he was blatantly ignoring the *Yeshivah’s* rules that *Shacharis minyan* attendance was mandatory. *Rav* Yaakov listened – agreed – but asked to see the student. When the student heard that the *Rosh Yeshivah* wanted to see him, he became nervous. “Now I am really in trouble,” he figured. Students were not commonly “invited” to meet with the *Rosh Yeshivah*.

He appeared before the *Rosh Yeshivah*, who informed him of the administration’s decision to relieve him of his dormitory privileges. The *bachur* listened and accepted his fate. It was not as if he

were surprised. He had been ignoring this rule for some time. He had trouble getting up in the morning, probably because he had trouble going to sleep on time at night. Regardless of the reason, he was out. The *Rosh Yeshivah* asked him whether he had alternate arrangements for sleeping. He said, "No." *Rav Yaakov* told him, "I want you to sleep in my house." The *bachur* was floored. First, he was kicked out of the dorm, and, now, the *Rosh Yeshivah* invited him to sleep in his house. This was too much. He articulated his bewilderment.

Rav Yaakov explained, "Your grandfather was a supporter of the Kovno *Kollel* where I learned in Europe. Since I was a beneficiary of your grandfather's kindheartedness, I owe *you* a favor which I am now able to repay. Veritably, I cannot permit you to return to the dormitory, because that would breach the *Yeshivah's* rules, but there is no reason that you cannot stay at my house."

A similar story is told concerning *Horav Moshe Feinstein, zl*, who attended a wedding. Prior to leaving, he handed the *chosson*, groom, an envelope containing his wedding gift. Later on, when the *chosson* and *kallah*, bride, were opening their gifts, they were shocked to see a check for 500 dollars from the *gadol hador*, preeminent Torah leader of the generation, *Rav Moshe Feinstein*. This was, in those days, an enormous amount of money (especially for a wedding present). The *chosson* shared his feelings with his father, who agreed that *Rav Moshe* must have erred and written an extra zero on the check. The next day, the father, together with the *chosson* and *kallah*, presented themselves at *Rav Moshe's* apartment: to thank him for the gift; and to return the check, which surely had been a mistake (that is what they thought, but *Rav Moshe* did not make mistakes.) *Rav Moshe's* response is a classic, "If I could give you 5,000 dollars, I would. Your grandfather was *Horav Pesach Pruskin*, with whom I studied. I felt such gratitude to your *zaide* that I wanted to give you a large present. This is the most that I can afford."

Hakoras hatov extends for generations. These *gedolim*, Torah giants, were well aware that the benefits reaped many years earlier had been transformative. Every act of kindness has an enduring effect. So, too, should be the consequent gratitude.