

And you shall take the first of every fruit of the ground... and go to the place that Hashem, your G-d, will choose to make His Name rest there. (26:2)

The *mitzvah* of *Bikkurim*, offering the first fruits, is a *mitzvah* which teaches us the importance of *hakoras hatov*, recognizing and paying gratitude to Hashem, and, by extension, to everyone and anyone from whom we have benefited. *Parashas Ki Savo*, which commences with the laws of *Bikkurim*, begins with the concept of gratitude to Hashem for the wonderful crop we have been fortunate to yield. We most often read this *parshah* on the *Shabbos* preceding the last week of the year, as a portent that *Tichleh shanah v'kilelosehah v'tacheil shanah u'birkosehah*, "Let the past year with its curses come to an end, and let the new year with its blessings, begin." As *Ramchal* (*Mesillas Yesharim* 8) writes, "Any person who delves into the good Hashem showers upon us every minute of the day, and the many wonders with which He continues to benefit us from the moment that we were born, would understand: how beholden we are to Him; how much we owe Him; and the ceaseless gratitude that we should express to Him. This applies across the board to everyone – rich or poor, healthy or otherwise; we are all constantly beneficiaries of His favor." (full translation)

What better time than when we are about to enter a new year, to begin by paying gratitude to Him. After all, how dare we ask for more if we have not thanked Him for what we have had until now? Being a *makir tov* defines one's humanness, and, without this *middah*, character trait, one just is not a mentch. Obviously, stories abound which underscore this verity. The following story, which offers a powerful insight into how we should approach the character trait of *hakoras hatov*, inspires me.

A *kollel* fellow who barely made ends meet, who with great difficulty was able to put basic food on his table, lived a life of total joy. He, his wife and children manifested such a sense of calm and joy that one would be hard-pressed to believe that they were overwhelmed with great economic hardship. They would constantly walk around expressing their boundless gratitude to Hashem for their good fortune.

They were blessed with a baby boy to add to their growing family. They prepared a meal to follow the *bris milah*, which was attended by a distinguished philanthropist – a man who was well-known for his vast financial holdings. In addition to his material bounty, he was also a *talmid chacham*, erudite scholar, who found time to study Torah daily. He "agreed" to hold forth and say a "few words" in honor of the joyous occasion. He began by reviewing the adversarial events that had taken their toll on the Jewish People during the past year. After blessing the father, mother, and newly-born infant, he closed with the prayer asking Hashem to end the curses that had plagued us in the past and to commence the new year with bountiful blessing. It was a fine speech to which everyone could personally relate – except the young father of the child. He began his discourse by saying, "I am unaware to what the previous speaker is alluding. I cannot fathom the meaning of

kilelosehah, curses, or adversity. Indeed, we have just culminated a year that was replete with so much good. Hashem has showered us with such kindnesses. We have truly been blessed.”

After the *seudas mitzvah*, festive meal following the bris, the philanthropist walked over to the young man, the father of the infant, and asked, “How is it possible that I – who lives amidst extraordinary luxury – see only black-bleak experiences, adversity, illness and depression, while you, who lives in abject poverty, express yourself with such joy and such gratitude?” (In other words, “Is there something wrong with me – or with you?”)

The young man replied, “A year ago, as we approached the *Yamim Noraim*, High Holy days, we accepted upon ourselves a *kabbalah tovah*, good undertaking. Every day, we would record on paper two kindnesses that we had received from Hashem. It did not have to be an earth-shattering, life-altering act of kindness, just an area in which we benefited. We did this daily for an entire year. Yesterday (the day before the *bris*), I opened the booklet in which I have been recording these Divine favors, and I read line after line. Before me were 730 kindnesses that we received from Hashem! Had you had the opportunity to review our notebook, you, too, would not refer to the past year as one of curse, because you would have realized how much Heavenly good you experienced this past year.”

Hakoras hatov begins with *hisbonenus*, contemplation. It is much easier to complain about things that go “wrong” than to acknowledge all those that go “right.” The well-known phrase, “Instead of cursing the darkness, light a candle,” encourages positive and proactive action in the face of difficulties or challenges. Rather than complaining and focusing on the negative, one should find a way to make a positive difference, thus transforming challenge into opportunity. Likewise, in the context of gratitude, one should focus on the positive aspects of life, rather than what he thinks are the negatives. The gratitude journaling in which that young couple participated, allowed them to acknowledge the daily gifts for which they should be thankful. By expressing gratitude for every good thing, we actively “light a candle” in our lives. This practice not only assists us in navigating through the dark times with a more positive outlook, but also enhances our overall well-being, as it fosters a positive environment for ourselves and those with whom we come in contact.