

## Gratitude

Where does the name “Jew”, *Yehudi*, come from? Why are we not called “Hebrew” or “Israelite”, as we were classified in early times? The reason, according to our teachers, is because the root of the name “Yehuda” is to thank — to express gratitude. Judah was the fourth son of Leah and she felt a profound sense of gratitude when he was born. There was a tradition that Jacob was destined to have twelve sons, who would comprise the twelve tribes of Israel. Since Jacob had four wives it was assumed that each wife would be allocated three sons. When Leah gives birth to a fourth son, she is overwhelmed with a sense of thanksgiving:

*She conceived again, and bore a son and declared, "This time let me gratefully praise Hashem"; therefore she called his name Judah; then she stopped giving birth: <sup>1</sup>*

Rashi comments:

*“I have taken more than my share, so I now need to give thanks”.*

A Jew must always feel this same sense of gratitude to God, continually recognizing that he is the recipient of heavenly blessings - the antithesis of a sense of entitlement. A Jew must acknowledge that he is a debtor who owes so much to his past - to his forebears and his progenitors; he is not a creditor to whom something is owed. This attribute of gratitude is reflected in his name, his identity, and shapes his essential character- *Yehudi*.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 29:35

Another indication of the enormous importance that Jewish thought places on our obligation to express gratitude is the following *midrash*:

*In the future, all sacrifices will be abolished except for the thanksgiving-offering. All prayers will be abolished except for prayers of gratitude<sup>2</sup>.*

Given the central role that sacrifices and prayer serve in Jewish life, this *midrash* is teaching us the central significance of gratitude. The need to express gratitude will remain even at a time that other spiritual duties and obligations will no longer be necessary.

Our Rabbis teach us that a key aspect of the experience of bringing the *Korbon Todah* (thanksgiving-offering) is the social component. When one brought a thanksgiving sacrifice after being saved from a life threatening event, he was required to bring forty loaves of bread in four different forms as well. One of each kind was given to the *Kohen*, leaving 36 loaves which had to be consumed that day and the following night. The medieval classic commentator on the Torah, the *Sforno*<sup>3</sup>, explains that this was to ensure that at the time that one expressed gratitude for his good fortune, one had no choice but to make this a social event. Included in this occasion was sharing one's food while recounting to others the story of the life- saving incident.

In *Alei Shur*<sup>4</sup>, Rabbi Wolbe further develops this interpersonal component of gratitude. He discusses the importance of overtly expressing feelings of gratitude to others as a means of fanning the flames of love and friendship between one Jew and another. He

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<sup>2</sup> *Vayikra Rabbah* 9

<sup>3</sup> Leviticus, 7:12

<sup>4</sup> *Alei Shur*, Volume two, p279

cites the Talmud<sup>5</sup> which states that if one gives bread as a gift to a child, it is important to let the child's parents know the source of the gift. As Rashi explains, identifying the source of this kindness evokes feelings of love and gratitude between Jews.

The need to express one's gratitude is also noted by secular thinkers. British novelist and academic C.S. Lewis, said:

*"I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation. It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are, the delight is incomplete until it is expressed."*<sup>6</sup>

Gratitude has an individual, more personal, component. In addition to the need to overtly express feelings of appreciation to those who have been kind to us, we also have to internally nourish an emotional awareness of gratitude towards God. The only part of the *Amidah* (or *Shemoneh Esrei*, 19 blessing prayer recited three times a day) that can't be delegated to the *chazzan* during his repetition of the *Shemoneh Esrei* is *Modim* — the part of this prayer that focuses most directly on expression of gratitude to God for all that He has done for us as individuals and as a people. This is because when it comes to giving thanks to God, we can't delegate to others. Each individual has to articulate his own declaration of gratitude in a manner that fosters an internal recognition of gratitude.

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<sup>5</sup> Beitza, 16a

<sup>6</sup> Lewis, C.S. (1996) Readings for Meditation and Reflection, HarperOne, NY

Rabbi Wolbe also discusses this facet of gratitude, which is more related to individual as opposed to interpersonal growth. He elaborates on the *midrash*<sup>7</sup> that explains that Aharon, not Moshe, invoked the plagues that involved water and land. The reason for this was because it wasn't proper for Moshe to show any signs of ingratitude to the water that saved his life as an infant, or to the earth that allowed him to hide the Egyptian he killed when protecting his fellow Jews. Obviously inanimate objects have no feelings that need protection. The reason why Moshe had to delegate these plagues to his brother was to develop in himself feelings of gratitude towards the vehicles of his salvation.

This aspect of gratitude was seen in a very concrete and moving way by those who visited Rabbi Yisroel Zev Gustman at Yeshiva Netzech Yisroel in Jerusalem. Rabbi Gustman always insisted on carefully caring for the trees and bushes in his garden, even though his students frequently offered to help him perform these seemingly menial gardening chores. He explained that during the war, he hid from the Nazis in a forest where the shelter of the bushes and fruit of the trees repeatedly saved his life. He felt that caring for these trees and bushes was a necessary expression of gratitude to these instruments of his survival.

Further insight into the primary importance of the expression of gratitude is provided by the following analysis of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik regarding the connection between gratitude, prayer and man's sustenance from nature.<sup>8</sup> In the Torah's

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<sup>7</sup> *Shemos Rabbah* 9:9

<sup>8</sup> Rabbi Hershel Schachter, *Nefesh HaRav* (1994) - Torah from Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik

discussion of the Creation, the following passages describe the creation of vegetation and precipitation:

*And every plant of the field before it was in the earth, and every herb of the field before it grew; for Hashem had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no man to work the soil.*<sup>9</sup>

Rashi, on this verse, points out that rain didn't come to earth until man was there to pray for it. In essence, Rashi says, the "switch" for rain is activated by prayer and gratitude — not the other way around:

*Why didn't it rain? Because man wasn't there to work the land, and there was nobody to recognize the benefit of rain. When man came and recognized that rain was a necessity for the world, he prayed for it and rain came down allowing trees and grass to grow.*

Rashi interprets the lack of rain and vegetation to the lack of recognition on anyone's part acknowledging the goodness and beneficence of God. When Adam was created, he recognized and acknowledged the great blessing and benefit of rain. Subsequently, when Adam prays for rain, his prayers serve as a trigger for rain to fall and that results in the growth of vegetation. All this is alluded to in the word *siach ha'sadeh* — the plant of the field. The word "*siach*", translated as vegetation of the field, refers not only to vegetation but also to prayer. We find this term in reference to Isaac's prayers,

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<sup>9</sup> Genesis 2:5

where the term “*lasuach*” is used.<sup>10</sup> The meaning of these verses, according to Rabbi Soloveitchik, is that since there was no concept of prayer in the world until the creation of man, there was no spark to ignite the force of rain. This phenomenon can only occur when man acknowledges and expresses his gratitude for this gift.

### **Psychological Perspective**

Secular thinkers also describe the central role that gratitude has in living a moral life. Cicero, the ancient Roman philosopher, described gratitude as a cornerstone of all values writing that: “*Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all the others.*”<sup>11</sup>

At first glance, being thankful does not logically seem to be of such central importance relative to the many other virtues that people strive for. Nevertheless, recent psychology research on the impact of building gratitude into one’s life clearly confirms the importance of cultivating this trait. Studies have found numerous benefits that stem from building the capacity for gratitude into daily living. Those who regularly express gratitude are more likely to be forgiving, generous, agreeable and less likely to be narcissistic and selfish.<sup>12</sup> Research repeatedly confirms that those with high scores on measures of gratitude also score high on measures of happiness. In one study, 95% of individuals describe feeling happy when expressing gratitude and over 50% say that expressing gratitude made them feel *extremely happy*.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Genesis 24:63

<sup>11</sup> Marcus Tullius Cicero, Selected Works, Penguin Classics, 1960

<sup>12</sup> McCullough, M. & Emmons, R.(2004) The Psychology of Gratitude, Chapter 7, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK

<sup>13</sup> Emmons R & McCullough, M (2003) Gratitude, Optimism and Health Counting blessings. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 84:377

From the viewpoint of parents and educators, a number of benefits result from teaching our children to be thankful. As a purely practical matter, when children express gratitude it makes it more likely that their benefactor will continue to act kindly towards them in the future. Perhaps more importantly, from the perspective of character education, the expression of gratitude also makes it more likely that the recipient will be generous to others.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, this research finding suggests that a pathway to teaching our children to be giving and charitable is inculcating in them the value of *hakaras ha'tov* — gratitude. Perhaps by focusing their attention on thankfulness for what they receive, we develop their ability to give.

### **Ingratitude**

A story was told to me (RP) by a congregant, regarding his father who was a prominent member of a Brooklyn synagogue many years ago:

*His father was an extremely kind and generous man who did favors for countless people. He noticed that a fellow congregant, whom he considered a friend, was acting strangely toward him, conveying a general attitude of resentment. Troubled by this behavior he said to him: "Reb Yankel, why are you angry at me? I haven't done you a favor yet!"*

This congregant told me that he learned a great lesson from this episode: When doing a kindness for another, there is often a duality of emotions created between the recipient of a favor and the benefactor.

Researchers have found that most individuals find feelings of indebtedness to be unpleasant. Many individuals are uncomfortable with feeling dependent on others. A favor creates an inherent sense of discomfort; it forces one to reciprocate and feel

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<sup>14</sup> Peterson & Stewart (1996) Antecedents and contexts of generativity. *Psychology and aging*, 11:21-33

obliged. The recipient is now a debtor, he owes his benefactor and that makes him uncomfortable, so he tries to minimize and belittle the favor. Rabbi Shimshon Dovid Pincus points out that the Hebrew expression for ingratitude — “*kafuie tov*” — is related to the Hebrew word “*kafa*”, meaning to be forced or pressured. For example, the Rabbis tell us that if an individual resists fulfilling an obligation in a religious court, the court is authorized to pressure him until he acquiesces. The term expressing this is “*kofim oso*” — they pressure or force him. Similarly, when the Jews were given the Torah at Sinai and were reluctant, at first, to accept, the *Midrash* says “*kafa aleihem*” — God tilted the mountain over them, threatening to annihilate them unless they agreed. Based on this, Rabbi Pincus submits<sup>15</sup> that, frequently, when a favor is done for a person, he feels obligated and even pressured to pay back the debt of gratitude that he owes to his benefactor. This creates a sense of imbalance, an uncomfortable feeling of dependence fueled by a sense of indebtedness and a need to reciprocate. This character trait is traced by the Sages to the beginning of time and to Adam at Creation.

Instead of expressing gratitude when given the gift of Chavah, the first woman, Adam blames her when confronted by God after defying His command to not eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. Adam’s first line of defense when accused of eating this fruit is to blame her by saying:

“The woman whom You gave to be with me gave me of the fruit of the tree etc...”<sup>16</sup> The Talmud<sup>17</sup> comments on this episode by pointing out the irony of how swiftly gratitude can turn to ingratitude.

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<sup>15</sup> *Tiferes Shimshon Al HaTorah*, Chukas

<sup>16</sup> Genesis 3:12

<sup>17</sup> Avodah Zara 5a

Rabbi Yechezkel Sarna<sup>18</sup> describes how a tendency towards ingratitude is built in as a default setting in the basic nature of man. He cites a *midrash* that explains why the word “*adam*” is used in the passage describing the punishment meted out to the generation that built the Tower of Bavel.: “*Hashem descended to look at the city and tower which the bnei Adam built.*”<sup>19</sup> This *midrash* explains that the inherent nature of man includes, as mentioned above, this tendency toward a lack of gratitude. Instead of expressing eternal gratitude for having been saved from the deluge, this subsequent generation rebels against God. They build a tower, which our Sages explain was motivated by a desire to storm the heavens and prevent God from sending future destructive forces upon mankind. Apparently the innate sense of gratitude which one should feel towards his benefactor is tinged with an underlying sense of thanklessness. Therefore, one has to be very careful to not allow this innate tendency towards being a *kafuie tov* to overtake him.

The following anecdote illustrates this tendency:

*A grandmother is watching her grandchild play on the beach when a huge wave comes and washes him out to sea. She lifts her eyes to heaven and pleads, “Please God, save my only grandson, bring him back!” A big wave washes the boy back onto the beach, good as new. The grandmother looks up to heaven and accusingly says: “He had a hat”.*

Our sense of gratitude is often incomplete. There is a tinge of the “ingrate” in us, because we somehow feel that what has been granted to us is incomplete.

Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner, reflecting the writings of the *Maharal* on the seriousness of ingratitude writes of the seriousness of failing to be grateful:

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<sup>18</sup> Delillas Yechezkel

<sup>19</sup> Bereishis Rabbo 38:9

*“When a person receives a benefit from his fellow, a seed of chesed is planted in his world. If the nature of Chesed is functioning healthily and properly, this seed cannot but give rise to additional chesed. But if the person is an ingrate, it is as if he uproots the sprouting of chesed with his bare hands. Without a doubt, uprooting a planting of chesed is even more antithetical to the essence of chesed than is simply being uninvolved in matters of chesed... An ingrate damages and destroys the very attribute of chesed...One who is ungrateful to his fellow; it is as if he is ungrateful to God, because his denial is a response not just to the particular act of chesed that was done for him, but also to attribute of chesed in the broadest sense.”<sup>20</sup>*

In light of this interpretation of ingratitude, it is not surprising to find the following statement made by the *Mahral*:

*“it is forbidden to do acts of chesed for one who will not respond with gratitude. For this reason, it didn’t rain until man was created to pray for the rain.”<sup>21</sup>*

To the extent that ingratitude is viewed as heresy, the *Maharal’s* position is understandable. One is not allowed to put an individual in a position where he is, in essence, ungrateful to God, and, at the same time, undermining one of the basic building blocks of humanity.

### **Habituation**

The enemy of gratitude is habituation. The way the human brain works is that we quickly become accustomed to even the most spectacular of gifts.

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<sup>20</sup> *Pachad Yitzchak*, Rosh Hashanah, #3, translated by Rabbi Dr. Shai Held

<sup>21</sup> *Gur Aryeh Genesis 2:5* “veayn maker betovosom”

*I ( DP) gave a paper at a beautiful resort in Hawaii. Surrounded by magnificent waterfalls, spectacular scenery and unforgettable sunsets, I engaged one of the hotel staff in conversation. I asked him if it is possible to ever get used to working in such a remarkable setting. He answered: "To me this is just a job, I don't notice the beauty anymore. I drag my feet coming to work every Monday morning just like everybody else."*

Related to this aspect of human nature is the unfortunate reality that we tend to be least grateful to those closest to us. Research on the psychology of gratitude has found that people tend to be more grateful for the unexpected. Human nature is such that we experience less gratitude for favors done for us by family and close friends than when somebody who we are less close to does the same favor.<sup>22</sup>

The tendency towards habituation is also seen in the relationship between man and God. In the classic work *Duties of the Heart (Chovos HaLevavos)*, Rabbeinu Bachya details the reasons for our ingratitude to God:

*"People...grow up surrounded with a superabundance of Divine favors which they experience continuously, and to which they become so accustomed that they come to regard these as essential parts of their being, not to be removed or separated from themselves during the whole of their lives. When their intelligence develops and their mental faculties become strong, they foolishly ignore the benefits the Creator has bestowed on them and do not consider the obligation of gratitude for Divine beneficence, for they are unaware of the high degree of the boon..."*<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> McCullough, M. & Emmons, R.(2004) The Psychology of Gratitude, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK

<sup>23</sup> *Chovos HaLevavos*, Introduction to Section Two; translated by Moses Hyamson; Feldheim

Contrast this to the following incident that beautifully illustrates how, in the face of an extremely stressful chronic situation, individuals can show gratitude for even the most basic human experience:

*At a retreat for families of children with severe cognitive and physical limitations, I (DP) met with a family who had an eight-year-old daughter who was born with such profound brain damage that she was unable to speak or engage in even the most basic self-care functions. Her mother told me that for the first four years of her daughter's life she was unable to sit up, and the family was given little hope that this most basic of human activities would ever be possible. The child's parents heard of a program overseas that offered intensive physical therapy for their daughter's condition, having some limited success in working with these children. After years of visits to this program their daughter was now able to sit up. The parents called over the counselor who was caring for their daughter at the retreat and with intense excitement showed me how this eight-year-old daughter was now able to see the world from the perspective added by her new-found ability to sit. The girl flashed a million dollar smile at her parents who met the smile with tears of pride and gratitude.*

The obvious lesson taught by these remarkable parents is that it is possible to have gratitude for even the most basic of gifts given to us on a daily basis. The challenge is finding a way, under normal circumstances, to continually remind ourselves, as Rabbeinu Bachya writes, of the “*superabundance* of Divine favors which we experience continuously.” Developing awareness of what to be grateful for even when life is going smoothly can require conscious effort and constant practice. As noted by Rabbi Sarna,

without practice, this trait will not flow naturally from man's innate tendencies. The default setting is habituation.

### **Developing a Habit of Attention: Finding Beauty and Meaning in the Mundane**

The passage in the Torah regarding gifts to the poor while working in the fields is incongruously placed in the middle of the Torah's section discussing the various festivals and holidays in the Jewish calendar. After teaching us the laws regarding Pesach and Shavuos followed by the laws of Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Sukkos, there is a strange and incongruous interruption in the theme of the Torah's text by the insertion of the commandment regarding gifts to the poor:

*When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not remove completely the corners of your field as you reap and you shall not gather the gleanings of your harvest; for the poor and the proselyte shall you leave them; I am Hashem, your God.*<sup>24</sup>

What is the significance of this interpolation? The *baalei Mussar* explain that when a Jew makes his pilgrimage to Jerusalem on one of the festivals, he is exposed to one of the highpoints of the Jewish experience. He senses the excitement and vibrancy of tens of thousands of Jews gathered together from the four corners of Israel, joining together in the observance of a Pesach and Shavuos. As a spectator, he stands in awe and reverence beholding the service of the Priests and the beautiful music and singing of the Levites. He is truly on a high and inspired beyond description. Reality, however, must soon set in when he leaves the holy city and goes back to his workshop or farm and is suddenly cast

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<sup>24</sup> *Leviticus 23:22*

from the heights of spirituality to the physical, material life of the craftsman or farmer. He is challenged to retain spirituality in his mundane, day-to-day activities. That is why the Torah injects the laws of sharing one's produce with the less fortunate in the midst of the festival portion. It reminds the Jew that the moments of exhilaration and spiritual highs must be carried over and applied to the fields and mundane living. The commandments of God are common to both arenas. The material and the physical can be infused and informed by the spiritual experiences that he had when he went on his pilgrimage.

By the same token, what inspired the non-Jew to reject his way of life and his beliefs and decide to convert to Judaism? In Jewish theology we never encourage proselytizing, on the contrary, we try to dissuade a non-Jew from converting, explaining to him the rigorous disciplines he will be subjected to as a member of the Jewish faith. We are always very frank and open with him regarding the strictures of Jewish law. Still it seems strange that while we give him instructions in the fundamentals of Judaism if we are convinced of his sincerity to become a convert, the Talmud tells us that of all of the commandments of the Torah it is these obligations to the poor that we must teach a convert before the process of conversion is complete:

*If a prospective proselyte comes to a Jewish court to convert to Judaism in the present era....we inform him of the sin of failing to observe the laws of Leket (leaving gleanings for the poor), Sh'ichichah (leaving forgotten sheaves for the poor), and Peiah (the part of the harvest left over in the corner of the fields).*<sup>25</sup>

Why is such importance given to this particular commandment? It is to teach the convert that while the inspiration which motivated him to convert is understandable — emanating

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<sup>25</sup> Talmud *Yevamos* 47a

either from a charismatic teacher or his experience witnessing special Jewish events, such as the majesty of the Jewish holidays or Jewish practice in the home on a Shabbos or festival — this enthusiasm and exuberance can easily ebb and wane when he must confront the reality of day-to-day living. It is for this reason that we teach him the laws that operate when he has come down from the mountain of spiritual heights to the field of the routine. We are teaching him that Jewish ideals are expressed in the tedious and the ordinary, even as it is true of the special majestic moments of life. This may well be termed “the ordeal of the ordinary,” which must in all frankness be taught to the prospective proselyte.

### **Developing a Habit of Attention**

Breathing is the most natural and reflexive continuous action of a person. The Sages noting the similarity between the Hebrew word “*neshamah*” (soul) and the Hebrew word *Neshimah* (breath), comment on the verse – *Let all souls praise God*,<sup>26</sup> that man should praise and thank the Almighty for every breath.<sup>27</sup> This is the ultimate example of their awareness of continually working on the need to overcome the tendency towards habituation.

Psychologists tell us that the antidote to habituation is consciously being mindful of how fortunate one’s condition is and how it could have been otherwise.

While not easy, we can develop a habit of awareness — a habit of attention.

Gregg Krech, an author and counselor who specializes in the psychology of gratitude,<sup>28</sup> walks us through a disastrous Monday morning that is destined for catastrophe from the moment the alarm clock fails to wake us, all the way through to a near-death experience

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<sup>26</sup> *Psalms* 150:6

<sup>27</sup> Bereishis Rabbah 14

<sup>28</sup> Krech, G.(2001) *Naikan: Gratitude, Grace, and the Japanese Art of Self-Reflection*, Stone Bridge Press, St. Paul, MN

driving to work. The series of mishaps culminates when faced with an angry tirade from the boss after arriving so late for work. It is only when things go wrong that our attention is grabbed. It takes such an “out of the ordinary” event to bring us to an awareness and appreciation of a “normal” day. Krech points out: “What would happen if we turn the story around and experience a day when the alarm goes off as intended and you arrive at work without unexpected traffic or accidents?” How do we cultivate an approach to life that pays attention to the expected?

Perhaps the most potent antidote to habituation, from a Jewish perspective, is the daily experience of prayer. One third of the prayers in the daily service address the theme of gratitude. What can be a more powerful answer to the challenge posed by Krech than thanking God three times a day with words expressing gratitude for the “miracles that surround us every day”? Of course, this too is a challenge. It is difficult to concentrate on the meaning of words said during prayer, and many experience the need to emotionally connect to the meaning of these words as a continual challenge. However, as we discussed, there are multiple spiritual and emotional benefits that emerge from concentrating on connecting to prayer in a manner that cultivates a habit of attention to what we should be grateful for.

Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz<sup>29</sup> discusses the dangers of “*tardeimas ha’heirgeil*” – the deep sleep brought on by habituation. Overcoming this requires that we cultivate a fresh look at what has become too familiar. He illustrates this with the following incident depicted in the Talmud:

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<sup>29</sup> *Sichos Mussar, Maamar 97*

*“Rav Alexandri went to the marketplace and called out: ‘Who wants life, who wants life?’ All the people came and gathered round him saying: ‘Give us life!’ He then quoted to them, “Who is the man who desires life and loves his days so that he may see good in them ... Guard your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit?”*<sup>30</sup>

What was Rav Alexandri telling people that they didn’t already know? Among the practical lessons that Rav Alexandri was teaching was that when widely-known information to which we might have become habituated is presented in a novel way, we can view it with fresh eyes in a manner that develops the habit of attention to what has otherwise become ordinary.

### **Cynicism:**

An enemy of gratitude is cynicism. Oscar Wilde said, “Cynics know the price of everything and the value of nothing.” To the extent that gratitude requires a focus on the positive, cynicism is characterized by sarcasm, suspicion, and scorn.

There is an interesting question posed by the *Meshech Chochmah* regarding the passage in the Torah that describes the punishment of a man who cursed God:

*And Moses spoke to the Children of Israel, and they took the blasphemer to the outside of the camp, and they stoned him to death; and the Children of Israel did as Hashem had commanded Moses.*<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *Avodah Zara*, 19b, *Psalms* 34:13-14

<sup>31</sup> *Leviticus* 24:23

The *Meshech Chochmah* asks why does it say “as commanded”, after all, the Jews did many things at Hashem’s command? Why single out the incident of the blasphemer for saying this?

He answers that a cynical complainer can cool off one’s enthusiasm. The blasphemer complained about the miracle of the Showbread. He scoffed at a mitzvah that involves making an offering of week old, cold, stale bread. There is always a danger when one is exposed to a complainer that a seed of doubt is planted regarding one’s zeal and commitment to what one is doing. The passage therefore tells us that the complaints of the blasphemer did not impact on the enthusiasm of the Jews in carrying out God’s command in performing the mitzvah of the Showbread. It does not refer to the carrying out of the sentence, but to their retention of loyal obedience to God’s commandment which had been challenged by the sinner.

### **Secular Perspectives on Cynicism**

Research in the workplace has found that cynicism thrives when one feels disappointed in oneself or others, and becomes disillusioned because of being treated in a manner that breeds distrust, frustration and resentment<sup>32</sup>. It is not surprising that when cynicism dominates in a family or one’s job, motivation is sapped and antagonism increases.<sup>33</sup> Reality television programs and sitcoms are often replete with cynical remarks – particularly when younger characters interact with their elders. What is particularly alarming is how common it is on sitcoms for children to be depicted as being chronically cynical, portraying this type of worldview as admirable and worthy of emulation.

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<sup>32</sup> Mirvis, P., and Kanter, D. L. (1991). *Beyond demography: A psychographic profile of the workforce*. *Human Resource Management*, 30(1), 45-68.

<sup>33</sup> Mirvis, P., and Kanter, D. L. (1989). Combating cynicism in the workplace. *National Productivity Review*, 8(4), 377-394.

The findings of the Josephson Institute systematically document how this influence has impacted on our children. In their 2009 survey of over 7,000 participants, the Josephson Institute of Ethics found alarming trends documenting the rise of cynicism in the United States. This institute has been taking the moral pulse of residents of the United States every two years since 1992. In their most recent survey, they report evidence that “The hole in the moral ozone seems to be getting bigger — each new generation is more likely to lie and cheat than the preceding one.”<sup>34</sup> Adolescents, in 2009, were found to be five times more likely, and young adults three times more likely, than those over 40, to cynically endorse the belief that one must lie and cheat in order to be successful in life. This is a particularly ominous finding since their research confirmed that those who believe that cheating is necessary are significantly more likely to cheat or lie when they become adults. Those who cheat as adolescents were also found to be significantly more likely when adults to lie to their spouses, customers, employers and insurance companies. It is of note that in this survey, participants who said that religion is an important part of their life tend to be less cynical than those who say that religion is not important (13% v. 18%). The obvious take-home message is that this alarming trend can be checked to the extent that parents and educators shield children from excess exposure to media that glorify cynicism. Needless to say, parents, educators and other adults in a child’s life must always be aware of their vital function as role models and act accordingly. Following some of the suggested recommendations below regarding cultivating gratitude should also serve to lessen the tendency towards cynical attitudes and behavior.

## **Recommendations**

### **(1) Counting One’s Blessings:**

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<sup>34</sup> Character Study Reveals Predictors of Lying and Cheating, Josephson Institute of Ethics, October 29, 2009

An important study regarding the benefits of gratitude suggests an intervention that can help effectively build awareness of what we should be grateful for in our daily lives.

In this study, over the course of ten weeks, participants were assigned to one of three groups:

(a) Subjects who were asked to write about five things they were grateful for during the past week.

(b) Participants were asked to enumerate five hassles from the past week.

(c) Subjects were asked to list five events that affected them.

In the ensuing period, research participants who were assigned to the gratitude group felt better about their lives as a whole, were more optimistic about the future, reported fewer health complaints and exercised more.

The actual script used in this study is informative:<sup>35</sup>

*At the beginning and end of each day, list five things for which you are grateful, and then take a few minutes to meditate on the gift inherent in each. One means of elucidating this sense of appreciation is the use of the following sentence stem: "I appreciate \_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_." In the first blank, list the person, event or thing for which you are grateful, and in the second blank state the reasons for each of the things for which you have expressed gratitude. Discuss the effects of one week of this practice with a classmate, and tweak the exercise as you wish.*

More recently, researchers have found that this technique is as beneficial for children and adolescents as it is for adults.<sup>36</sup> For example, in one study, adolescents were given the following instructions:

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<sup>35</sup> Script from Emmons & McCullough, (2003)

*“There are many things in our lives, both large and small, that we might be grateful about.*

*Think back over the past day and write down up to five things in your life that you are grateful or thankful for.”*

In that study, the adolescents experienced improved levels of optimism, life satisfaction and overall satisfaction with school relative to adolescents in a comparison group. In a review of the research measuring the efficacy of this technique,<sup>37</sup> researchers summarize seven studies that found significant increases in feelings of well-being when one thinks about what they should be grateful for in this systematic manner. Of course, it isn't necessary to write down what one is grateful for on a list. Going around the table during Friday night meals and asking family members to share what they are grateful for that week can reap similar benefits. This has the added advantage of increasing family members' knowledge of details about each other's life — a benefit that has independent advantages according to research in family psychology.<sup>38</sup>

**(2) Direct expression of gratitude:**

Directly expressing thanks leads to even more dramatic benefits. In a study done by Seligman and his colleagues,<sup>39</sup> adults were given one week to write and then deliver a letter of gratitude in person to someone who had been especially kind to them but had

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<sup>36</sup> Froh, J. J., Sefick, W. J., & Emmons, R. A. (2008). Counting blessings in early adolescents: An experimental study of gratitude and subjective well-being. *Journal of School Psychology, 46*, 213–233

<sup>37</sup>Wood, A., Froh, J., & Geraghty, A. (2010) Gratitude and well-being: A review and theoretical integration, *Clinical Psychology Review (30)* 890-905

<sup>38</sup> Gottman, J. (1999) *The seven principles for making marriage work*, Random House, New York

<sup>39</sup> Seligman, M. E. P., Steen, T. A., Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2005). Positive psychology progress: Empirical validation of interventions. *American Psychologist, 60*,410–421.

never been properly thanked. Happiness levels of the individuals who carried out this exercise increased substantially for a month after they paid the visit to their benefactor.

*A teacher was speaking to an 11<sup>th</sup> grade student who said that her love of learning came from a third grade teacher whose enthusiasm for teaching continued to inspire the student even eight years later. The teacher asked: “Did you ever thank your third grade teacher or even let her know of the way she changed your life?” When the student answered “no” – she immediately asked her to go into a private area of the school office to write a note expressing her gratitude to the teacher. Both the student and the recipient of the note described the experience as deeply meaningful.*

(3) Research has found that overcoming the natural tendencies that serve as impediments to gratitude can help cultivate a personality that is more likely to be grateful. The following characteristics serve as impediments to gratitude:

**(a) Self-preoccupation:** When one is so engrossed in their individual life-dramas, little room is left for one to notice the needs of others. This calls for developing the muscle of empathy and awareness of the needs and suffering of others, even when pulled into the inevitable hassles that accompany daily life.

In his biography of his teacher, Rav Yerucham Levovitz, Rabbi Wolbe relates a memorable story about the extent of his teacher’s empathy. Rabbi Levovitz was told that a Jewish man was arrested by the Russians and accused of being a spy, an extremely serious offense that often resulted in the execution of the prisoner. It was reported that the level of Rabbi Levovitz’ anguish was so great that when he woke up the morning after the news, his beard had turned white.

**(b) Expectation:** Human nature is to expect whatever one has become accustomed to. We tend to no longer be grateful or attentive to something that is expected and routine. What gets our attention is when the expectation is not met. A possible antidote is to develop the habit of paying attention to the lessons learned when our expectations are not met. When one is confronted with periods of illness instead of expected good health, once one's health returns it is doubly important to try to hold on to the feelings of gratitude for good health. Likewise, on a more mundane level, when luggage is lost by the airline and one has to live for several days without all the clothing one is accustomed to, he can redouble his efforts to more fully appreciate his wardrobe once the luggage is returned.

**(c) Entitlement:** The feelings of entitlement that often accompany the many luxuries of day-to-day life in an affluent society serve to block our awareness of how grateful we should be for the many gifts we regularly experience. When feelings of entitlement dominate, gratitude will, by definition, take a backseat. The antidote is to pay attention to the daily life of those less fortunate than we are. Periodic exposure to those living in poverty or with illness and disabilities, or those living in countries where basic civil liberties aren't respected, can serve as an important antidote to entitlement.

4. **Journal Keeping:** As noted earlier, systematically writing about what one is grateful for can have powerful benefits. There are many disciples of the early *baalei Mussar*, such as Rabbi Yisroel Salanter, Rabbi Yitzchak Blazer and others who have transmitted to their students either orally or in their writings that these great *Mussar* teachers had a practice of keeping what was called a *pinkus* – a notebook or diary on their nightstand.

They would record their experiences of the day and the lessons they learned from the previous day's activities, before retiring for the night.

In other cultures as well, such as Japan, there is a similar practice called "*Naikan*". This is a way of life for many, marked by structured self-reflection that, in that culture, helps develop a sense of gratitude.

Practitioners of *Naikan* ask themselves the following three questions related to gratitude during their daily meditation:

- (1) What have I received from others?
- (2) What have I given to others?
- (3) What troubles and difficulties have I caused others?

Whether in writing or thought, a daily "*cheshbon ha'nefesh*" (self-assessment) that includes reflection on our levels of gratitude and transcendence of self-involvement can be an important aspect of developing this trait.

5. Although at first glance admitting to our mistakes is not linked to gratitude, on a deeper level cultivating such non-defensiveness can also help nourish a sense of gratitude. As Greg Krech says: "As long as I am humbled by my own mistakes or limitations, I am more likely to receive what I am given with gratitude and a true sense of appreciation for the giver as well as the gift."<sup>40</sup>

6. Parents should remember the importance of modeling gratitude in order to teach their children. Since it is so difficult to maintain gratitude towards those we are closest to, continually reminding ourselves to express gratitude to one's spouse, family members, and close friends is an important component of educating our children in this important trait. As noted in our book, "*Balanced Parenting*", instilling gratitude — by taking an

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<sup>40</sup> Krech, G. Exploring the link between gratitude and attention. To Do Institute

extra moment to thank a sales clerk at the store, or tipping the paper boy for getting the paper on the porch every day — lets our children see that gratitude is part of the daily repertoire of social interaction.

Children should be reminded to thank parents for what they may take for granted — for example, help with homework, a lift to a friend's house, or taking them out to dinner. Parents should resist any tendency to inadvertently sabotage this lesson by responding with phrases like: "Don't mention it." Instead, the child should be praised for expressing gratitude. Acting as a role model by expressing gratitude to others, in front of your child, is another powerful lesson in instilling this core value.