"The Paper Towel Syndrome":Thoughts for Parashat Ki Tavo, September 17, 2011

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How many times has this happened to you? You've gone out of your way to help someone. You've spent time and energy, and possibly even incurred financial expense. Yet, once the person has benefitted from your kindness, he/she doesn't bother to show appreciation, not even to say a sincere thank you.

I call this the "paper towel syndrome." People use you like a paper towel, and then toss you out without a second thought. They've gotten what they needed out of you, and then they move right along with their lives as though they had always been entitled to your acts of kindness.

This week's Torah portion includes the text that a farmer is supposed to recite when bringing the first fruits to the priest. In thanking God for His beneficence, the farmer first recounts the experience of the Israelites in Egypt and states: "the Egyptians dealt ill with us, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage" (Devarim 26:6).

Rabbi Yitzhak Shemuel Reggio, a 19th century Italian Jewish commentator, notes that this passage indicates that the Egyptians were "kefuyei tovah"—ingrates. With all the benefits they had derived from Joseph, they nevertheless returned his kindness with acts of cruelty against his people. Joseph was essentially a "paper towel"—to be used and unceremoniously discarded. The Israelites were enslaved—to be exploited as "paper towels" without any thought as to their human rights and dignity. No need to say thank you, no need to show appreciation, no need to demonstrate gratitude.

While we may remember instances when we were treated like "paper towels", we might be less likely to keep in mind cases when we ourselves treated others with the paper towel syndrome. We have benefitted from the time, trouble and expense which others have devoted to help us—and yet we may not have always shown appreciation. We may have taken this kindness for granted, as though we were entitled to it.

The Torah's description of the first fruits and tithe offerings underscores how important it is for us to be grateful—and to express gratitude. The hallmark of a religiously sensitive person is to thank all those who have benefitted him/her, and not to take kindness for granted.

Treating others as "paper towels" is obviously to dehumanize them. It is to reduce them to utilitarian objects whose purpose is merely to fulfill our needs.

In his essay, "The Community", Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik underscored that halakha demands high respect for the dignity of others. "To recognize a person is not just to identify him physically. It is more than that: it is an act of identifying him existentially…To recognize a person means to affirm that he is irreplaceable. To hurt a person means to tell him that he is expendable, that there is no need for him." In other words, to recognize a person means to affirm that he/she has human value, that he/she is appreciated, that he/she matters to us. To hurt a person means to treat him/her as a "paper towel," expendable, to be used and discarded.

Certainly, we do not act kindly because we want or expect a show of gratitude. We do what is good and what is right because it is good and because it is right. Yet, how much nicer our world would be if we and others avoided the "paper towel syndrome," if we all could develop that sensitivity and graciousness to recognize the human dignity of others. Just as others should not treat us as "paper towels," so we need to be very careful not to treat others as such.

If ingratitude and callousness are signs of morally deficient human beings, gratitude and sensitivity are hallmarks of humanity at its best.

Angel for Shabbat