Gratitude Never and Forever-- Thoughts for Parashat Tsav

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Angel For Shabbat, Parashat Tsav

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

A popular Judeo-Spanish proverb teaches: Aze bueno y echalo a la mar. Do a good deed, and cast it into the ocean. The idea is: do what is right and don't expect any thanks or reward. The motivation for doing good…is the doing good itself, not the anticipation of gratitude or benefit.

Nevertheless, deep down in our hearts, it is difficult not to feel hurt if our goodness is not acknowledged. In "Notes from the Underground," Fyodor Dostoevsky's narrator says: "I'm even inclined to believe that the best definition of man is—a creature who walks on two legs and is ungrateful. But that is not all, that is not his principal failing; his greatest failing is his constant lack of moral sense…and, consequently, lack of good sense."

Ingratitude is related to a lack of moral sense, a lack of good sense. A person who receives benefit should naturally and spontaneously express appreciation to the benefactor. It is not merely good manners, it is simple decency. Although the benefactor should not expect thanks, the recipient should give thanks.

Yet, we all sense the truth of Dostoevsky's definition of man as a creature who is ungrateful. We receive so much from so many; and yet do not always express appreciation. We may simply be careless or thoughtless, or we may feel we are entitled to things without having to say thanks. We certainly feel the callousness of people who do not thank us for our good deeds, but we also need to introspect to be sure that we ourselves are not guilty of the same shortcoming.

In the past, I have written about what I call the “paper towel syndrome,” where people are used and then unceremoniously cast aside. As long as a person is deemed “productive” or “useful,” the person is respected. But once the person has been fully exploited, he/she is put aside and forgotten, cast into the trash bin of human history. No one says thanks any longer; no one even gives him/her a second thought. Aze bueno y echalo a la mar: do a good deed, cast it into the ocean. There’s no point expecting gratitude or appreciation. Ingratitude is a hard fact of life. Do good…and that is its own reward.

This week’s Torah portion delineates offerings that were to be brought by the Israelites in their service to the Lord in the Mishkan (sanctuary). The various sacrifices in those days covered a range of themes: sin offerings, purification offerings, thanksgiving offerings. The underlying theme of the offerings was: to come closer to the Almighty, one must have moral sense, good sense…and a sense of gratitude. A Midrash teaches that in the Messianic future, all sacrifices will become obsolete…except for the thanksgiving offering. Thanksgiving will always be a necessary component of a healthy moral life. Being ungrateful is a serious moral deficiency.

At the root of ingratitude is a basic arrogance, a self-absorbed view of life—an essential lack of humility. Egotists think of themselves, not of others. They use others to advance their own goals, and they are quick to discard people once they are no longer of use to them. Egotists validate Dostoevsky’s observation that human beings are characterized by ingratitude, lack of moral sense, lack of common sense. The Torah teaches us to be grateful, to express gratitude, to live humbly, morally and sensibly. These are difficult virtues to attain and we need to work hard to attain them. If we lack these qualities, we need to improve ourselves. If others lack these qualities, we ought to pity them.

Meanwhile: aze bueno y echalo a la mar.