Learning to Say Thank You

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There is probably no sentiment as fundamental to Judaism as recognizing the good that others do for us and expressing our gratitude to them (in Hebrew, "hakarat ha-tov"). God is reputed to have created the world in a burst of loving-kindness for which humanity and all living creatures should intuitively praise Him, and the Jewish people's special relationship with God is predicated on His kindness in having redeemed the Jews from Egypt. The very word for Jew in Hebrew, Yehudi, comes from the verb le-hodot, to thank, and hearkens back to our foremother Leah thanking God for giving birth to her fourth son. Therefore, I was not surprised to recently come upon a poster in Har Nof (a largely Haredi, Jerusalem suburb) proclaiming that this Jewish calendar year is the year of Hakarat Ha-tov.

Doubtless, we have many things to be thankful for—continued good health, a strong economy, some respite from our enemies--but this poster did not mention any of these issues. It loudly proclaimed that all and sundry should go to the grave of the illustrious Rabbi Yitzhak Ze'ev Soloveitchik (R. Velvel) and ask his forgiveness for not having stringently followed his halakhic ruling that one must recite the guest's blessing for his host during Grace After Meals. Failure to do so, so the poster claimed, is clearly a lack of gratitude. Furthermore, the poster advised everyone to seek halakhic guidance to determine whether they need to request forgiveness for not having said the host's blessing at the wedding of a friend or at their yeshiva (with the intent of thanking the donors). In particular, the poster stressed that one should ask forgiveness of one's parents for not having recited the blessing on their behalf, as even six year old children eating their sandwiches at school should recite the host's blessing for their parents. Technically speaking, their parents, who are kind enough to feed them and/or pay their tuition, are their hosts (Ketubot 65b). (Indeed, the poster adds, even a husband should thank his wife and a wife her husband—the more gratitude expressed the better in these tough economic times.)

At first I was astounded that this was the hakarat ha-tov the poster was talking about. While the process of mending our ways must begin with the small things that are more likely to touch us personally, effect our psyches, take root, and blossom, making this blessing the sole focus of Hakarat Ha-tov seemed to miss the bigger picture. However, when I re-read the poster, I realized that the crime committed by not reciting this blessing was not merely one of poor manners or of lax moral standards, it was actually a form of theft! R. Velvel, ztz"l, declared that his students should "demand (titba) of them that they recite the host's blessing" because not doing so actually incurs a monetary loss. The author of the poster deduces this from the fact that the word "demand," in Hebrew, implies that the host may actually sue the guest in court, and this would only be true if he caused a significant monetary loss by failing to recite the blessing.

The reason for this loss is the fact that the blessing includes a prayer that the host's "property" or business dealings be successful; the poster explains that failure to make this request causes the host financial loss. In fact, the failure to say Grace in a group of ten men—thus, increasing the power of the prayer as "when the community prays, God does not reject their prayers" (bAvodah Zarah 4b, author's source)—probably requires a special request for forgiveness for undermining the financial well-being of the yeshiva where one said Grace. Undermining another Jews' livelihood is certainly a serious crime, so R. Velvel's ruling makes sense.

However, what is lost in this attention to detail and the laws of damages is the simple matter of saying thank you. As R. Bahya Ibn Paquda writes at the beginning of Duties of the Heart being thankful is a religious duty and desideratum. We do not thank God for creating the world because we owe Him something or because, heaven forbid, He needs us to. We thank God because it is the right thing to do, because we intuitively sense that someone who bestows a kindness on us should be thanked. This is even true of a slave expressing gratitude to his master or a child to a parent, where clearly the giver's beneficence is not without self-interest. How much more should we thank God or other human beings whose giving is truly selfless or close to it.

This having been said, the true irony of this poster is that the difficult economic times mentioned in this poster as an especially good reason for saying this blessing are the result of the Israeli government cutting back on subsidies and welfare benefits to, among others, the Haredi community. These "economic decrees"—treated by the Haredim like those of the Russian Czars' of yesteryear—are partially a result of balancing the budget and partially a result of the secular state's being fed up with sectors of society (particularly, the ultra-Orthodox) that do not produce economically, consume vast resources, and do not even say "thank you."

When a secular Israeli tax payer who serves in the army looks at Haredi society, he sees a parasitic growth that produces nothing, contributes nothing tangible, and complains about not getting enough subsidies or welfare benefits to prop up its enormous families and enable its men to sit and learn comfortably without having to work. While the Haredim may argue that they have built up many not-for-profit organizations that benefit the entire population and that their learning protects the country, as much if not more than the army does, these arguments do not really hold water, since the secular and religious Zionist sectors of the population, generally speaking, work, serve in the army, study Torah (especially, the religious Zionist), and build up not-for-profits too. Furthermore, the very claim that learning Torah is comparable to giving up one's life to protect fellow Jews is both inherently absurd and possibly inconsistent with Torah values, as the Talmud itself says, "Why do you think your blood is redder than mine?"

Ultimately, the poster makes sense. The Haredim should declare a year devoted to giving thanks. As a sector of society, they have been consistently unwilling to thank the rest of Israeli society for protecting and supporting them. Furthermore, as a group they have been unwilling to recognize that God has created a (secular) Jewish state that supports more yeshivot and Torah learners than have ever existed before in the world at one time! (Indeed, for this very reason the late R. Ovadiah Yosef ruled—unlike most Haredi rabbinic decisors—that it was permissible to say Hallel on Israeli Independence Day in order to thank God for the creation of the state). Most recently Haredim have been attacking the government for having the audacity to lower their welfare payments and have even been physically attacking other Haredim who have joined the army to protect them! Even R. Ovadiah's Shas Party has recently attacked the state for attempting to destroy the Yeshiva world by considering drafting yeshiva students into the army. Since the government has explicitly stated that it is not attempting to destroy the Yeshiva world, the deliberate use of inflammatory rhetoric to misrepresent the government's plans is the height of ingratitude. It is definitely time for Haredi society to read this poster and say thank you to those at whose table they dine.

I would suggest that this Hakarat Ha-tov campaign begins by instituting R. Shlomo Goren's ruling regarding the host's blessing. R. Goren (the first Chief Rabbi of the Israel Defence Forces and the third Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel) ruled decades ago that a blessing for the Israel Defense Force and the State of Israel should be recited in Grace After Meals at the place where the host is thanked. As he wrote, we are all supping at the table of the IDF and the State of Israel, (for if not for the government and the army we would be annihilated man, women, and child by our enemies and the country would be in a constant state of chaos). [Chief Rabbi Shlomo Goren's Passover Haggadah, Am Oved, 1974, p. 58] The Haredim would do well not to forget this.