

I spent much of this summer reading and studying to prepare for this year and for the Holidays. Book after book and text after text, I sought out ideas and material that would enrich our year. Towards the end of the summer I had a clear vision of what I wanted to say and what I wanted to happen.

Then, one night, I sat down to begin watching the new season of Orange is the New Black on Netflix. In it, one of the characters, a guard, tried to give advice to one of the inmates. She said, “According to scientific studies, the best thing you can do to improve your mood is to write a list of all the things that you are grateful for.” I was floored. This was exactly the area that I wanted to investigate together in this moment, the role of gratitude in our lives and in how we evaluate the year that has past.

I had even read of those same studies that this character – Ginger – referenced. Diana Butler Bass, in her book on gratitude – called Grateful – wrote

“Positive emotions, like gratitude, foster resiliency, which strengthens our physical health, especially our heart health and the ability to recover more quickly from illness and surgery. Thus, gratitude can actually create better outcomes in our future health. Resiliency also works to improve psychological health.... Researchers discovered that positive emotions ‘not only make people feel good in the present, but they also increase the likelihood that people will function well and feel good in the future’ and cause an ‘upward spiral’ of well-being.”

The physical and psychological benefits of gratitude in our lives are well-researched and undisputed, so much so that this knowledge was shared in a trivial scene in a pop-culture television show. This is phenomenal, and certainly bodes well for our society that this information is this pervasive.

However, seeing this shared on television gave me pause. If the power of gratitude is so well-known, then what is the benefit of me discussing it here on this day? What will I add to this conversation that isn’t already well-known by so many people in our community.

And indeed, this question was raised by another character in the show. One of the other guards, when Ginger started to bring up the power of gratitude, interrupted her. He asked “Don’t they all just basically say the same thing? Be grateful, be mindful, blah, blah, blah”

If the show itself is mocking gratitude as trite, then what am I doing talking about it on Rosh Hashanah? This gave me pause, I began to reconsider my message.

Then, two and a half weeks ago, Clara broke her leg. She was biking to work, as she had done throughout the summer. In fact, she had been enjoying it so much that she had just bought a new e-bike to make the commute easier and something that could continue throughout the year. Then, something went wrong, and the bike slipped out from under her.

Even as I start to tell this story here, I reflexively insert the words “Thank God.” Thank God, there were no cars on that particular road. Thank God, she didn’t crash into anything. Thank God, that she only broke her fibula – which several doctors at the PJC have told me is the bone to break in your leg. Over and over again, I express in conversation how much worse

the accident and injury could have been, and how grateful I am that it wasn't. This month has been an exercise in exactly the forms of gratitude that I am discussing.

This is exactly what these studies and those who promote them instruct us to do. I was looking at a moment that has seriously injured Clara and made the life of my family more difficult. Where resentment or despair were possible, I found ways to be grateful in spite of all of those negative points. By expressing gratitude for the positive aspects, I have prevented them from being overshadowed by the negative and avoided being overwhelmed.

While what I am describing is a good personal practice, I don't actually believe it is particularly Jewish. It does not reflect Jewish tradition, or Jewish thought, or Jewish belief. Jewish gratitude is not about personal growth, or personal health, or internal satisfaction. It is about our relationships and the foundation that they are built upon. Gratitude is meant to be that foundation. It is meant to define our relationship with God and should also frame our relationships with one another and with the community.

Gratitude, in a Jewish context, is known as **הכרת הטוב** *hakarat ha-tov* – acknowledgement of the good. This teaches us that Jewish gratitude is more than a feeling that we hold within ourselves. At a minimum, we must express our gratitude, making certain that those to whom we are grateful know how we feel. But that is only the minimum expression.

**הכרת הטוב** *hakarat ha-tov* means that we must touch those people to whom we are grateful, we should strive to impact their lives in the same way that they have impacted our own. As we look back on the year that has past, our tradition teaches us not to view it in terms of accomplishments or failures, but in terms of relationships. We must consider how we have harmed those in our lives, and whether or not we lived up to our best selves. We ask forgiveness for the injuries that we have caused and strive to improve ourselves in the year that begins today. We are also taught that we should, when it is possible, forgive those who have harmed us.

What can be lost in this process is gratitude. Evaluating this past year in terms of injury and sin can lead us to jump from one difficult moment to the next. We will slide right past moments of kindness and of joy. An honest evaluation of this year requires us to do both. And when we are finished, it is just as important to do **הכרת הטוב** *hakarat ha-tov* for those good moments as it is to do **תשובה** *teshuvah* for the moments when we fell short.

We can best understand the importance that the Rabbis placed on gratitude and **הכרת הטוב** *hakarat ha-tov* through their understanding of what happens when it is absent. In reading the beginning of the book of Exodus, they were perplexed by the line “A new Pharaoh arose in Egypt, one who did not know Joseph.” How could it be, they wondered, that this Pharaoh was unaware of all of the kindness that Joseph did for the Egyptian people, when even today Joseph’s actions are well known in Egypt? It seemed impossible, and so they concluded that Pharaoh did know, but he had no regard for Joseph, and was ungrateful towards him. Rather than **הכרת הטוב** *hakarat ha-*

*tov*, Pharaoh demonstrated כפיית הטובה *k'fi'yat hatovah*, literally an inversion of the kindness.

Previously, Pharaoh was forced to be grateful to Joseph because Joseph benefitted him and all of Egypt. From a certain perspective, this placed Joseph above Pharaoh, as his benefactor. Now that there was no longer the possibility of benefitting from Joseph, Pharaoh could take charge of the system again – restoring himself to the top position. Honoring Joseph and expressing gratitude for his kindness would no longer benefit Pharaoh or Egypt and so Pharaoh believed that there was no reason to do so.

In the portion that we read from the Torah this morning, we can see that Abraham's practice of gratitude is very different from Pharaoh's. While Pharaoh was grateful only when it would benefit him or Egypt, Abraham chose to be grateful and shared his gratitude with those around him who were not part of the miracle.

The portion opens with God remembering Sarah and fulfilling the promise that God had made to give them a child. In spite of the joy that Sarah and Abraham certainly felt in this moment, we read nothing that can be understood as **הכרת הטוב** *hakarat ha-tov*. Next, we read that Abraham obeyed God's instructions and circumcised his son Isaac. Abraham is obeying a commandment, he is not expressing gratitude.

It is at this point that something different happens:

וַיִּגְדַּל הַיֶּלֶד וַיִּגְמַל וַיַּעַשׂ אַבְרָהָם מִשְׁתֶּה גָדוֹל בְּיוֹם הַגְּמִל אֶת־  
יִצְחָק:

*Vayigdal ha-yeled vayigamal vaya'as Avraham mishteh gadol  
b'yom higameil et-Yitzchak*

The boy grew, and he was weaned, and it was on *that day* that Abraham threw a great feast.

Looking at this verse, the Torah commentator, Malbim, asked why Abraham threw this feast at *that* moment and not when Isaac was born, or when he was circumcised? Why wait years? It is because, up until this point, Abraham's gratitude was tempered by the knowledge that everything had been an act of

obligation. God made a promise and then kept it. Abraham accepted God's commandments and then followed them.

It is at this moment that something changes. Isaac was not weaned because God promised that he would be, nor because it was Abraham's religious obligation to wean him. Indeed, the weaning of Isaac was a moment in which Abraham was at most a peripheral figure – it was between Sarah and Isaac. And yet, Abraham chose this moment to express his gratitude. He was grateful that Isaac was beginning an existence beyond his parents, a life of his own.

The way that Abraham chose to express his gratitude is equally instructive for us today. He didn't recite a psalm of thanksgiving or offer a prayer. He threw a feast. He invited all of the most important people in his life to share in his joy. They were even less involved in the weaning of Isaac than he was, Abraham's gratitude was certainly not directed towards them. Nonetheless, his expression of gratitude touched and impacted the world around him.

Returning to Pharaoh, the rabbis continue their Midrash and end with a point that is particularly relevant to us at this

moment in the year. Pharaoh knew Joseph but chose not to regard him or express gratitude for what he had done.

In time, Pharaoh's **כפיית הטובה** *k'fi'yat hatovah*, his disregard of Joseph's good deeds, directly led him to demonstrate **כפיית הטובה** *k'fi'yat hatovah* to God. This is the reason why, when Moses first came to him to demand the release of the Israelites, Pharaoh responded, "I do not know the Lord." Pharaoh was not ignorant, he was ungrateful. We can understand this to mean that if we develop the habit of demonstrating ingratitude in minor situations, it will become easier to be ungrateful in our more significant relationships.

We should also take the Midrash's point as it is presented. It concludes with the claim that that there is nothing more difficult than ingratitude, for it leads to an absence of goodness in the world. One who is ungrateful cannot accept the kingdom of heaven. When we train ourselves to be grateful towards other people, we are more readily able to be grateful to God. As we deepen our relationships with other people, it becomes easier to deepen our relationship with God.

This is exactly what our tradition teaches us to do. In Psalm 100, which titles itself “**מזמר לתודה**” *mizmor l'todah* – A Psalm of Thanksgiving – we learn that it is through acknowledging our relationship with God that we become God’s people – that we accept the kingdom of heaven.

This Psalm was recited to accompany a thanksgiving sacrifice in the Temple in Jerusalem. Our ancestors combined words with actions. It was through their actions and their words that they were able to express the gratitude that they felt, and to acknowledge their relationship with God. This act of **הכרת הטוב** *hakarat ha-tov* also emphasize the relationships that existed with other people. The sacrifice was made to God, and a portion was given to the priests to share with their families, the rest was eaten by those bringing the sacrifice and anyone that they chose to welcome to their meal.

Herein lies a distinction between the emotion – gratitude – and the action – **הכרת הטוב** *hakarat ha-tov*. Gratitude is an emotion that can often well up inside of us unbidden and at unexpected moments. These moments of spontaneous gratitude are impossible to hide. But they are also impossible to control, they happen when they happen. **הכרת הטוב** *hakarat ha-tov* can occur separate from emotion. We can recognize a kindness and respond appropriately even when we don't feel grateful.

Every relationship presents us with moments that require forgiveness. This is one of the central themes of the **ימים נוראים** *yamim nora'im*, that we must ask for, and offer, forgiveness to the people who are a part of our lives. Without this, wounds can fester, relationships can sour, and we cease to grow.

I am afraid that if all we pay attention to in this moment are the challenges in our relationships, then we might miss all that is beautiful, and good, and that needs to be acknowledged. Every person, and every relationship – with very few exceptions – contain within them something that is good. Those moments and

interactions deserve to be recognized, indeed it is our obligation to do so.

In this light, the moments since Clara's accident that call for **הכרת הטוב** *hakarat ha-tov* do not include the accident itself. I am grateful, in the abstract, that Clara's injuries were not worse, as they easily could have been. But more accurately, I am grateful for the support that everyone in our community have given to us. Many have brought food or helped with errands. Thank you. Even more have offered a kind word and a helping hand. Thank you. Others have given us reassuring advice based on their experience and expertise. Thank you. There have been recommendations on ways to make life easier and offers to assist with the daily tasks that still must be done. Thank you.

This experience has reminded me that we are not alone in Pelham, even as most of our family lives elsewhere. That we are part of a community that is not only willing to help, but eager to do so. Thank you.

As we look back on the year that has passed, asking for forgiveness for the moments when we fell short, let us also be

sure to acknowledge the moments in which others made life easier, more joyful and more meaningful.

If, as we saw with Pharaoh and Joseph, **כפיית הטובה** *k'fi'yat hatovah* can strain relationships and lead a person to reject God, then **הכרת הטוב** *hakarat ha-tov* can deepen our relationships with one another and cause us to recognize God's presence more readily in our lives.