

THE IMPORTANCE OF DEMONSTRATING GRATITUDE TO HASHEM

(BY RABBI DAVID HANANIA PINTO SHLITA)

It is written, “You who cleave to the L-RD your G-d, you are all alive today” (Deuteronomy 4:4). Concerning this subject our Sages have said: “Is it possible, then, for a human being to walk after the Shechinah, for has it not been said, ‘The L-RD your G-d is a devouring fire’ [Deuteronomy 4:2]? However [the meaning is] to walk after the attributes of the Holy One, blessed be He. As He clothes the naked, as it is written: ‘The L-RD G-d made for Adam and for his wife garments of skin and clothed them’ [Genesis 3:21], so should you clothe the naked. The Holy One, blessed be He, visited the sick, as it is written: ‘The L-RD appeared to him by the plains of Mamre’ [ibid. 18:1], so you too should visit the sick. The Holy One, blessed be He, comforted mourners, as it is written: ‘It was after the death of Abraham that G-d blessed Isaac his son’ [ibid. 25:11], so you should also comfort mourners” (Sotah 14a).

Yet how can a person be expected to demonstrate the same degree of compassion as Hashem does with man?

Because of our many sins, a person is always in the process of modifying his habits. On some days he prays well and with great concentration, which immediately impacts his mood (as when he returns from synagogue content). On other days he may wake up “on the wrong side of the bed” and remain in a bad mood all day long. He may still be tired even though he just woke up after a full night’s sleep, and therefore his prayers will be said without enthusiasm or concentration, and he will constantly be looking at the time. At that point his prayers will seem like a heavy burden.

The same applies to Torah study, for a person’s habits in this regard can also change on a daily basis. Sometimes he adheres to a regular schedule of Torah study, and sometimes he neglects it. Sometimes he studies with great enthusiasm, appreciating the value of the mitzvah, and sometimes he ignores it or (even worse) distances himself from it. We really need to get to the heart of this matter in order to understand it. How can a person change his habits so often and adopt such contradictory attitudes if he is absolutely certain that there is a Creator Who directs the world and that he should fear Him?

To explain this, let us say that cleaving to Hashem means actively seeking to emulate Him. This is only possible when a person is conscious of and grateful to the Holy One, blessed be He, for all the kindnesses He has shown him. This gratitude must come from the depths of his heart; it cannot be superficial. It may be compared to a father who wholeheartedly thanks someone who has saved his son’s life. In that case he may even kiss his feet out of gratitude.

Such should be the conduct of a person who senses the immense and continual kindnesses that the Holy One, blessed be He, has bestowed upon him and his family. When he senses this, time can end without providing him with enough of an opportunity to properly thank Hashem.

The result of such an attitude is that he will always be thankful to Him and will never change his habits.

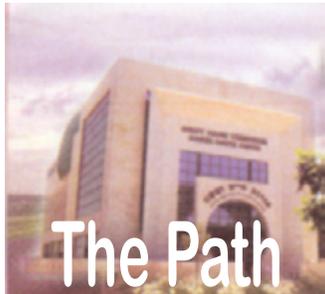
We often say “good morning” or “good evening” simply out of politeness to people who say the same to us. How much more should we thank, praise, and exult the Creator, Who constantly bestows thousands of kindness upon us each day, from morning till night!

When Moses said, “You who cleave to the L-RD your G-d, you are all alive today” (Deuteronomy 4:4), he meant that when we constantly thank the Creator for all the kindnesses He grants us, we will then merit living before Him in this world and in the World to Come. We will merit to constantly cleave to Him. In fact a person who is grateful and thanks the Creator of the world – Who resides in him and helps him in all his daily activities – will merit to cleave to Him.

This is hinted at in the verse, “You who cleave to the L-RD your G-d, you are all alive today,” for the term hadeveikim (“who cleave”) alludes to the words mid-dah (“characteristic”) and modeh (“thankful”). This means that it is precisely when a person characteristically thanks the Holy One, blessed be He, that he will merit to constantly cleave to Him. It also means that he will constantly be “alive” before Him. As we have said, it is only when a person demonstrates gratitude to G-d and thanks Him for all His kindnesses that he merits a constant attachment to Him. At that point his habits and conduct will no longer waver, and in every situation, good or bad, he will continue to trust in Hashem. This cleaving to Hashem will lead him to rely on Him, especially at this time, after Tisha B’Av, when we long for the rebuilding of the Temple. If we cleave to the Holy One, blessed be He, then He will fulfill our wishes and certainly hasten the rebuilding of the Temple. Yet if a person seriously works on himself, he will have one question remaining: Why has the Temple not been rebuilt?

This is why Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai said, “I am able to exempt the whole world from judgment from the day that I was born until now” (Sukkah 45b). This he could do, but in terms of the future – meaning the rebuilding of the Temple – he could not do alone, for the power of an individual does not compare to that of a great number of people. In fact the power of many working together in unity is incomparably greater. These are extremely profound concepts. Each generation must repair what another has damaged.

This is why we must do everything in unity. Everyone must work together like a single person with a single heart in order to rectify what has been damaged and bring about the construction of the Temple in splendor and glory. We will then ascend to our land in joy and worship Hashem in the Temple, in the holy city of Jerusalem. Amen, may it be so!



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GUARD YOUR TONGUE!

No Difference

There is no difference between a person who speaks Lashon Harah of his own free will, and one who speaks it out of compulsion. If someone were to compel you to eat non-kosher food, would it be permitted? Of course not! The same applies to Lashon Harah.

Suppose that David is burning with curiosity to know who committed a certain sin. He even says to his friend, “Look, you can tell me who did it. We’re good friends, and I promise not to tell a soul! Just give me a hint. If you don’t, you’ll regret it...I won’t leave you alone until you tell me.”

David is using every possible way, from enticement to harassment, to convince his friend. Despite David’s stubbornness, however, his friend must absolutely avoid telling him what he knows.

– Netzor Leshoncha 1:4

MUSSAR FROM THE PARSHA

The Paramount Importance of Prayer

It is written, "I implored the L-RD at the time" (Deuteronomy 3:23).

How happy should we be to have the ability to pour out our hearts to our Father in Heaven at any time! How much joy should fill our hearts because we can speak to Him, tell Him of our troubles, and ask: "Please G-d, please save us!" We can also, in times of joy, say to Him: "Please G-d, make this last!" Every Jew has received this gift, the ability to pray for the future and give thanks for the past. Even outside of regular prayer, at any time we need, we can address Hashem and speak to Him from the bottom of our hearts without being ashamed of having to ask for things we need. Consider, for example, how much we ourselves want our children to address us with their needs. Consider how happy we are to be able to answer their requests when we know that it is for their good. The same could be said concerning our relationship with our Father in Heaven. He is happy to hear our voice, to accept our prayers, and to answer all our requests if it is for our good. Of course while turning to prayer we must still work on ourselves. Nevertheless, what cannot be obtained through good deeds can sometimes be obtained through prayer. As the Sages taught, "G-d told the Children of Israel: 'Be diligent in prayer, because there is no better service. It is even more lofty than the sacrifices, and even if a person is not worthy of having his prayers answered...yet because he prays and repeatedly beseeches, I will act kindly with him'" (Tanhuma, Vayeira 1). Let us learn from Moses, for although he knew that Hashem had decreed that he was not to enter the land of Israel, he still did not give up. Instead he continued to pray as much as possible for the decree to be annulled. He prayed so much that the Sages took note of the numerical value of va'etchanan, namely 515, and taught that Moses uttered 515 prayers, until finally Hashem said to him: "Enough! Cease your prayers!" In fact if Moses had recited but one more prayer, he would have annulled the decree and entered the land of Israel. When we realize this, how much more should we rejoice in this gift, which is for our good, and how much more should we use it as if it were our last resort, especially in our time, when so many troubles confront us. Through prayer we can come closer to Hashem, and we definitely know that nothing bad will happen to us under His protection. We just need to realize that Hashem "is close to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth" (Psalms 145:18). Although numerous open miracles have been performed for people who asked tzaddikim to pray on their behalf, when the Chafetz Chaim was asked for a blessing he said: "A father is not happy when one of his children sends him a request through an intermediary. He wants his own child to address him, not an intermediary. How much more does the Holy One, blessed be He, Who is good and does good, wait for His children to address Him in prayer. As it is written, 'Let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet' [Song of Songs 2:14]."

As a result, we must not only strengthen ourselves with regards to our regular prayers (such as Shacharit, Mincha, and Arvit), but also turn to Hashem at all times.

A Pearl From the Rav

It is written, "You who cleave to the L-RD your G-d, you are all alive today" (Deuteronomy 4:4).

Although we must all cleave to Hashem and do His will, in his book Pahad David, Rabbi David Pinto Shlita asks: "How can we cleave to Hashem, for He is a devouring fire?"

The verse answers this question by teaching: "You who cleave" – you, the Children of Israel, must first cleave to one another – "all" of you – in unity, and then you will be able to "cleave to the L-RD your G-d," which is what constitutes being "alive." Just as the Holy One, blessed be He, gives life to the world, we must also cleave to the life of Hashem, for nothing is greater.

Seeing Only the Good

It is written, "Please let me cross over and see the good land" (Deuteronomy 3:25).

Since it is obvious that Moses would see the land if he crossed into it, why did he ask to "see the good land"?

We must always ask the Holy One, blessed be He, to show us the good in everything. Therefore Moses asked to "see the good land," meaning that he wanted to see only the good side of the land of Israel.

– Ohel Torah

A Rich Man Answers Roughly

It is written, "The L-RD said to me, 'It is enough for you! Speak no more to Me of this matter'" (Deuteronomy 3:26).

Commenting on the verse, "A poor man offers supplications, but the rich answers azut [roughly]" (Proverbs 18:23), Rabbi Tanhuma said: "A poor man offers supplications. This is Moses. But the rich answers roughly. This is Hashem, the richest of all, Who said to him: 'It is enough for you!'"

The Yid Hakodesh (Holy Jew) of Pshischa said that in the world above, Rabbi Tanhuma was asked to explain why he said that Hashem "answers roughly." Rabbi Tanhuma replied that if Moses had entered the land of Israel, the Final Redemption would have occurred immediately. Because Moses was not worthy, however, it must occur through Mashiach the son of David.

This is alluded to in the word rav ("enough"), which is formed by the first letters of Ruth and Boaz (resh and beit). The Final Redemption must only come through Mashiach the son of David, a descendant of Ruth and Boaz.

To form the complete names Boaz and Ruth, we need to add some letters to resh and beit. We need to add az to the beit and ut to the resh. These additions, az and ut, together form azut ("roughly"), which is what Rabbi Tanhuma alluded to in stating, "The rich answers azut." That is, the word azut can be found within the word rav ("enough"), which Hashem said to Moses, and which alludes to Ruth and Boaz.

Insights into the Greatness of Shabbat

It is written, "Safeguard the Sabbath day to sanctify it" (Deuteronomy 5:12).

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai said: "When Shabbat is sanctified on Friday evening, a tabernacle of peace descends from Heaven and spreads over the world. This tabernacle of peace is Shabbat, and when it comes down, all evil spirits, demons, and all the defiled hide themselves... Hence the world is under special protection, and we do not need to say the prayer, 'Who protects His people Israel forever. Amen.' This prayer has been prescribed for weekdays, when protection is needed. But on Shabbat a tabernacle of peace is spread upon the world and protects it on all sides. Even the sinners in Gehinnom are protected, and all beings are at peace, both in the upper and lower spheres. Therefore we conclude our prayer on this day with the words, 'Who spreads the tabernacle of peace over us, over His entire people Israel, and over Jerusalem.' ... A woman should kindle the Sabbath light with zest and gladness, since it is a great honor for her. Furthermore, she qualifies herself thereby to become the mother of holy offspring who will grow to be shining lights of learning and piety, and will spread peace in the world. She also procures long life for her husband. Hence she should be very careful to observe this ceremony" (Zohar I:48).

The Zohar also states, "That day is bedecked with seventy crowns...and all the grades shine all in the gladness of the benedictions, with sanctity upon sanctity, and the additional sanctity. ... A man should gladly and willingly [recite Kiddush] and testify before the Master of the Faith. Whoever gives this testimony and puts his heart and mind to it, his sins are thereby atoned" (Zohar II:207b).

On Fridays, when Rav Tanhuma returned from the river (where he immersed himself for Shabbat) he sat down for moment, lowered his eyes, and rejoiced. He said that he sat down to see the joy of the angels, those who brought the souls of the tzaddikim to Gan Eden, and those who brought down extra souls for men.

A Witness

It is written, “Hear O Israel, the L-RD is our G-d, the L-RD is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4).

The Zohar states: “On the head of one who recites Shema, to accept the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven, the Shechinah rests – a witness to testify of him before the Holy King.... Therefore the letter ayin of the Shema is written large, and also the dalet of the word echad, and when put together they form the word eid [witness]: A witness before the Holy King. ... It is certain that upon the head of the man who unifies the Name of the Holy One above and below, the Shechinah descends to rest, to bless him with seven blessings, and to say of him, ‘You are My servant Israel, in whom I take glory’ [Isaiah 49:3]” (Zohar II:160b).

The L-RD is One

It is written, “Hear O Israel, the L-RD is our G-d, the L-RD is One” (Deuteronomy 6:4).

The gaon Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian Zatzal states that the term “the L-RD” signifies the attribute of mercy, and the term “G-d” signifies the attribute of justice. However these two ways of governing the world are really “Hashem is One.” In other words, even when it seems that Hashem is at times dealing with us according to justice, and at times according to mercy, we must realize that Hashem is One. He does not change in any way, and therefore any change we perceive originates from us. It depends on our actions.

– Chochmat HaMatzpun

The Love of Hashem

It is written, “You shall love the L-RD your G-d” (Deuteronomy 6:5).

The Malbim asks how it is possible to actually order a person to love, since love depends on the heart. He answers by saying that the Holy One, blessed be He, loved Israel first (as we say in our prayers, “Who chooses His people Israel with love”), and a person automatically loves those who love him.

The Sefat Emet adds that since Hashem commanded us to love Him, we must conclude that every Jew has the power to do so. All that is needed is for this natural ability to be awakened and used. This is what the mitzvah of loving Hashem consists of: Doing what is necessary to awaken the power to love Hashem, a power that is hidden within us all.

– Torat HaParasha

With All Your Heart

It is written, “You shall love the L-RD your G-d with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6:5).

The Mishnah states: “With all your soul. Even if He takes your soul. With all your might. With all your money” (Berachot 54a). The Chiddushei HaRim adds: “With all your heart. Even if He takes your heart – even when you feel that you no longer have a heart to serve Hashem – you must still serve Him.”

EISHET CHAYIL

How To Pray

Once on the yahrtzeit of our Matriarch Rachel, Heshvan 11, Rabbi Chaim Shmulevitz went to pray by Rachel's tomb. Coming from the woman's section, Rabbi Chaim could hear the voice of a woman in prayer. This woman was barren, and she was desperately praying for help: “Mother Rachel, you yourself felt the bitterness of childlessness. Therefore I beg you, intercede on my behalf so I can have a child!”

Rabbi Chaim was very moved when he heard this, and he said to the woman: “I'm certain that your prayer has been accepted in Heaven. Next year, I want to be the Sandak for the circumcision.” He asked someone to verify the woman's identity, and the following year Rabbi Chaim was indeed the Sandak for her child's circumcision! – He Tithalal

REASONS FOR THE MITZVOT

How Can We Love? How Can We Not Love?

It is written, “You shall love the L-RD your G-d” (Deuteronomy 6:5).

Contained in the first paragraph of the Shema is the mitzvah to love Hashem. Although our first reaction might be to think that it is impossible to command a person to love, yet how can we not love Hashem? How many kindnesses does the Creator grant us, whether we are conscious of them or not? He protected us while we were in our mother's womb, and He formed us in good health. He created this amazing world and all it contains so we could benefit from it. All we have to do is to leave our daily routine for an instant in order to admire our surroundings without second thoughts or concerns. Just look at the wondrous creation that Hashem made, and how much wisdom it contains, especially in us, in our own bodies! Furthermore, what would all the beauty in the world matter if Hashem had not given us eyes to see it with? How grateful should we be for our ears, so complex, so delicate, a mechanism that allows us to hear the melodies of nature. At the same time, the ability to speak lends beauty to communicating with others and helps us to emerge from our solitude. The same applies to all our bodily members, wherein we can perceive Hashem's wisdom, all of it being for our good. Hashem created us in order to do good for us. However if all this good were given to us freely, without effort on our part, our faces would be covered in shame. He therefore placed us in this world so we can gain merit by performing His mitzvot, and in this way He will reward us. This kindness, a complete kindness, will therefore be without any shame. The more we reflect on this, the more we must ask, “How can we not love Him?”

That being the case, let us ask the opposite question: Why have we received the commandment to love Hashem, since it is an obvious and natural thing to do? Why is a commandment necessary? The answer is that in His great love, Hashem commanded us to do simple and natural things – things that we would do in any case – in order to add to our merit. Since this passage pleases Hashem, He commanded us to remember it every day in the Shema, “When you lie down and when you rise.” We must write it upon our hearts, and in the tefillin of the arm, which is close to the heart, He commanded: “You shall bind them as a sign upon your hand.” We must not divert our thoughts from Hashem, and in the tefillin of the head He commanded: “They shall be as totaphot between your eyes.” So as to have them before our eyes when we go out, He commanded: “You shall write them upon the mezuzot of your house.” Now if these things are truly infused in us, will we not teach them to our children? This is why He does us an even greater good by commanding: “You shall teach them to your children.” Therefore how can we not love Him, since He wants to do us so much good? In this too He does good for us, commanding: “You shall love the L-RD your G-d.”

A TRUE STORY

He Gives Wisdom to Those Who Fear Him

It is written, “For it is your wisdom and discernment in the eyes of the peoples” (Deuteronomy 4:6).

When the Vilna Gaon (5480-5558) made his way to Berlin at the end of his years of exile, he was already known for his brilliance. Therefore when people learned that he was coming to town, the leader of the Jewish community, the great Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi, began organizing a magnificent welcome for him, one befitting the Vilna Gaon.

The neighbor of Rabbi Yaakov was a well-known German professor, and when he saw all the frenzied preparations taking place, he inquired as to their reason. Rabbi Yaakov was happy to tell him that the great Vilna Gaon was soon arriving, a man who was fully versed in every Torah domain and familiar with secular knowledge as well. When the professor learned that the Vilna Gaon was skilled in astronomy, he decided to ask him a few questions, ones he had been working on for many years.

The next day the professor knocked at his neighbor’s door, and he was eventually brought in to see the Vilna Gaon. The Gaon listened as the professor explained his astronomy questions. Then when he finished, the Gaon took out a sheet of paper and a quill, made a few drawings, underlined a few points, and handed him the paper. When the professor saw what he had drawn, he was stunned! He said, “Of course! That’s it – that’s the answer!” He explained that these problems had stumped astronomers at the University of Berlin for years, for nobody had been able to answer them! Yet the Vilna Gaon answered them in an instant!

YOUR EYES SHALL BEHOLD YOUR TEACHER

Rabbi Nathan Neta Shapira of Krakow – The Author of Megale Amukot

The gaon Rabbi Nathan Neta Shapira Zatzal was born in 5345 in Horodna. His father, Rabbi Shlomo, was a kabbalist and the son of Rabbi Nathan Shapira, the author of Mavo Shearim on Shaarei Dora. Rabbi Nathan Neta quickly became known as a gaon and kabbalist throughout the Diaspora, and when the time came he was appointed as the Rav and Av Beit Din of the great city of Krakow in Polish Galicia.

The Chida wrote that a maggid would study with Rabbi Nathan Neta every day. It was also said that Eliyahu HaNavi would speak with him face to face, and engraved on his tombstone are the words: “Here lies a holy man of G-d, a man who revealed deep and hidden mysteries, one who spoke with Eliyahu HaNavi face to face.”

Rabbi Nathan Neta Shapira wrote many books of Kabbalah, but he is especially known for his Torah commentary entitled Megale Amukot. In it he gives 1,000 explanations for the tiny aleph in the word vayikra (Leviticus 1:1). He also gives 252 explanations on the verse, “Do not continue to speak to Me further about this matter” (Deuteronomy 3:26).

Rabbi Nathan Neta had hundreds and even thousands of students, people who saw in his actions the ways of the Rishonim, for he lived a life of great austerity. On Av 13, 5393, at the age of 38, his soul departed for the celestial academy, and his body was laid to rest in the old cemetery of Krakow. May the memory of the tzaddik be blessed.

THE DEEDS OF THE GREAT

Better to be Burned than to Shame Someone

Mar Ukva had a poor man in his neighborhood into whose door socket he used to throw four zuz every day. Once [the poor man] thought, “I will go and see who does me this kindness.” Mar Ukva stayed late at the house of study on that day, and his wife accompanied him home. As soon as [the poor man] saw them moving the door, he went after them. However they fled from him and ran into a furnace from which the ashes had just been swept. Mar Ukva’s feet were burning, and his wife said to him, “Raise your feet and put them on mine.” Since he was upset [for his wife was apparently more righteous than him, since her feet were not burned], she said to him: “I am usually at home, and my donations are direct.” [That is, since she was at home, the poor had easier access to her than to her husband. Also, she gave food to the poor, something they could benefit from immediately. Her husband gave them money, which required them to go out and purchase food.]

What [is the reason for] all this? ... Better for a person to throw himself into a fiery furnace than to publicly shame his neighbor.

– Ketubot 67b

IN THE LIGHT OF THE HAFTORAH

True Consolation

It is written, “ ‘Comfort, comfort My people,’ says your G-d” (Isaiah 40:1).

Why is the word “comfort” repeated? Israel’s suffering in exile stems primarily from the claim made by non-Jews that we are damned for all eternity, since they say that G-d has abandoned us and no longer wants anything to do with us. Therefore the very fact that Hashem is telling the prophet Isaiah to console us, and that He is our G-d, constitutes a great consolation, one that strengthens and comforts us. The Maggid of Dubno explained this with a parable: Two men set out for a distant place. One of them, a poor man, went in search of work, while the other, a wealthy man, left on account of his wife, a dreadful woman who wouldn’t leave him in peace.

Since time passed without their wives hearing from them, these women tried to learn more about their whereabouts. A merchant eventually brought greetings from their husbands, as well as letters from them. However he wanted to rest a little before unpacking his merchandise and giving them the letters.

The wife of the wealthy man went away, but the wife of the poor begged him to give her the letter immediately.

When the merchant asked her why she was more insistent than the other woman, she said, “That woman doesn’t need anything. She’s only afraid that her husband abandoned her. When you told her that her husband sent her greetings, and even a letter, it calmed her down. The fact that her husband wrote to her meant that everything was fine, and that put her mind at ease. However I have nothing at home, and I’m eager to know what my husband wrote. I want to know if he found a job!”

Similarly, the prophet Isaiah says to the Jewish people: “Comfort” – this very fact should console you; “comfort My people” – Hashem sends you words of consolation and proclaims that He is “your G-d.” Now that’s a tremendous consolation for us in exile.

– Ma’ayana Shel Torah