

TO SAY THANK YOU; PERCHANCE TO FEEL GRATITUDE

by Rabbi Ephraim D. Becker, Ph.D.

With apologies for the pause in my submissions, and with thanks for your patience...

The Torah reveals a number of significant motivators in a person. One such motivator is the need to repay kindness in kind. Only a person whose soul is sold out can receive without feeling a sense of indebtedness. The more sensitive the soul, the smaller the kindness for which one feels indebted. A dull soul might only feel indebted to one who saved his life, while a more refined soul could feel indebted for benefaction received even if not intended by the doer (eg. He opened the door for himself but I was able to take advantage of the open door to go in myself).

There are several ways by which we might address our in-born sense of indebtedness. One way is to reduce our sense of indebtedness (which is a humble pie, indeed) by avoiding receipt of kindnesses. By not receiving, goes the logic, one need not be plagued by feelings of indebtedness. Another, still weaker, response is to attempt to reduce the indebtedness generated by the kindness by downplaying its significance (eg. He was going there anyhow; he did it for himself, he's a crook and whatever I saved is mine, anyway, etc.). Another method of addressing our tendency to gratitude is by using money. As it has been said, ever since the phoenicians invented money there has been only one way to say thank you. That is a pity. Acquitting one's obligations in this way (while surely much better than not addressing the obligation at all) does not fully capitalize on the opportunity created by the indebtedness.

The most noble way to address our built-in tendency to indebtedness is to celebrate it. That is to look forward to the humility and beholdeness that comes with being a recipient. Gratitude moves us to acts of caring and beneficence towards our benefactors; it forces us out of our self-centeredness. In a word, gratitude is the best gift we have.

As a people of the Torah, we are instructed by G-d not to utterly abhor the Egyptians, our ancient taskmasters, since we found refuge there from the famine that gripped us in Canaan. Surely our hosts acted out of pure self-interest. Yet we were in need and there they were, self-interest notwithstanding.

We even find reference to the fact that some of us refrain from truly asking G-d to address our deepest needs and desires for fear of the indebtedness created by the granting of our request. We can see, then, that repaying a kindness is not just an act, it is a powerful drive, with potential to draw us closer to one another upon discovery of kindnesses received, or driving us away from one

another in an effort to avoid the implications of being a beneficiary. We would do well to regard this drive carefully.

Thank you for listening.