

HAKORAS HATOV

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

God told Moshe, "Pinchas, the son of Elazar, the son of Aharon HaKohen, stopped My anger towards the Children of Israel, because he was zealous on My behalf, which prevented Me from destroying them because of jealousy. (Bamidbar 25:10-11)

THERE IS NO way to over-estimate the importance of HaKores HaTov, of showing appreciation to someone who has done something good for you. Kabbalah explains that it was the lack thereof that resulted in expulsion from Gan Aiden. Eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil against the expressed command of God did not force man out of Paradise. It was Adam's lack of appreciation for a good God had done for him.

As humans, we need to RECEIVE appreciation. It's a form of validation. If we do something good, especially if it was not easy to do, we want to know that it was worthwhile. Apparently that includes more than just knowing that we did a good act. It also includes knowing the good act was perceived as one as well.

As humans, we need to SHOW appreciation. In order to show appreciation you must feel it, or at least know that you SHOULD feel it. And, you can't feel appreciation if you take things for granted, which tends to happen as a result of habituation, high expectations, and/or a sense of entitlement. And that is usually a function of overly high self-esteem.

I was once riding a bus home from Jerusalem. A few stops before mine, someone got off the bus using the front door and didn't bother to thank the bus driver. The driver didn't appreciate that, and spoke his mind to the rest of us still on the bus as he drove away.

The bus driver was a middle-aged man (I was in my late 20s at the time), who had probably fought in a couple of the Israeli wars. I don't know if he liked his job, but I certainly wouldn't have. It is not easy being a bus driver, having to stop-and-start all day long, and deal with all kinds of people. His last comment was (in Hebrew), "That's the problem with this generation! Everyone thinks they deserve whatever they get!"

Fortunately, I am one of those people who does say thank you to bus drivers when I get off the bus, if I use the front door. That time, I made a point of using the front door so I could definitely say thank you on my way off his bus. It was a lesson I remember as clear as day some 32 years later. I really try

not to take ANYTHING or ANYONE for granted.

I have come to believe that it would be a good thing for people to watch a documentary on World War II every once in a while. I do. Over 78 million people died within a period of five years. It wasn't the result of a plague or natural disaster we could not control. It was because of a couple of megalomaniacs, INDIVIDUALS whose sense of entitlement was so overwhelming that they felt the brutal loss of millions of lives was worth it.

They were also able to infect their entire populations with the same sense of entitlement, so that they would be willing to make greatest sacrifices for it. The Japanese greatly increased the number of their casualties because both their military and their citizens chose death over surrender. Their greatly inflated sense of honor was more important to them than life itself. People today should have to see the death and destruction that such an attitude can cause.

In fact, this led to the dropping of two atomic bombs. The original plan of the Americans was to invade the island of Japan using conventional warfare. When the Americans saw just how far the Japanese were prepared to go to defend their honor, and how many American servicemen it had already cost them on smaller islands, they knew that actual invasion was not viable. The cost in American and Japanese lives would be too high.

President Truman knew that if he did not drop the bomb and instead attacked mainland Japan, it would cost the Americans around 200,000 soldiers. He also knew that if the American public later found out that there had been a quicker and "safer" way for the American's to end the war in the Pacific, and they hadn't used it, the American public would be outraged.

So, on August 6, 1945, Truman gave the order to drop the bomb on Hiroshima to immediately end the war—because the Japanese preferred to die inflicting as much damage on their enemy as they could, rather than to accept surrender. And when that wasn't enough to change their mind, three days later he again ordered a bomb dropped, this time on the city of Nagasaki, finally bringing the Japanese people to surrender.

It is our sense of entitlement, which our lack of appreciation reveals, that ruins just about everything. It destroys marriages, pits children against their parents, and undermines the fabric of a peaceful and cohesive society. It's not about bringing down corrupt leadership. That's a matter of right and wrong. It's about letting unnecessarily high personal expectations lead to unruly behavior at the cost of the greater good.

The Greater Good. That's another important piece of the HaKoras HaTov equation.

Everyone lives in this world as individual and as part of a larger world. We all love peace and security, but we only get it when society works cohesively, which would be easy to do if everyone was the same and believed in the same ideas.

This is very far from the reality. We see that people are so different from one another, and that there

are so many different sets of beliefs. It's amazing that ANY aspect of society remains, given how many people have such different views of life and what they think that they are entitled to enjoy. How is it even possible for unity to exist when people are so divided over so many important issues?

There has to be something that is more important than everyone else's personal issues. There has to be some value to which everyone can subscribe that is worth fighting for, and for which making sacrifices makes sense. The "Greater Good" IS that value and ideal that causes people to willingly put aside their own desires in order to maintain it. Without it, their society can never achieve any real unity and is destined to disintegrate over time.

Selfish people cannot relate to the Greater Good. People who feel entitled do not sacrifice for the Greater Good. People who do not appreciate the importance of society and what it gives them will not put their personal desires aside when they clash with the Greater Good. They'll take what they want or need from society, but give back only that which they have to, which pretty much describes a lot of people and many "societies" today.

When God rewards Pinchas in this week's parsha, it is not just as a reward. It is Divine HaKores HaTov. God doesn't just say, "Pinchas saved your lives, and because he did such a self-sacrificing thing, I'm going to reward him." It's a lot more than that.

Instead, God makes a point of telling everyone that, not only did Pinchas do them a HUGE favor and risk to his own life and portion in the World-to-Come, but that he did a favor for God as well. "He was angry for ME," God tells everyone, "jealous for ME, so that I didn't have respond this way Myself. As an expression of MY gratitude," God told the nation, "he is inducted into the Kehunah and has an ETERNAL covenant with Me!"

So, if God, to Whom we owe EVERYTHING, and Whom we are COMMANDED to serve, still feels and shows gratitude when something good has been done His behalf, how much more so should we follow that example. It turns out that having HaKores HaTov is not just a good trait to have, it is a DIVINE one.