

GRATITUDE -- A KEY TORAH PRINCIPLE

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Ki Savo

Gratitude -- A Key Torah Principle

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: CD #824 Hitting An Older Child. Good Shabbos!

Ki Savo contains the mitzvah of bringing the First Fruits (Bikkurim) to the Bais HaMikdash. The fruits are brought to the Kohen and their presentation is accompanied by a declaration [Devorim 26:5-10] expressing one's gratitude to the Almighty in the context of a brief history of the Jewish people.

The Alshich is bothered by a Medrash in Parshas Bereishis. The Medrash (in a play on words of the opening words of the Torah) states that the world was created for the sake of that which is called "Reishis" [first]: The world was created for the sake of the nation of Israel who is called "Reishis". Likewise, the world was created for the sake of Torah, which is called "Reishis". Finally, the world was created for the sake of the Mitzvah of Bikkurim, which is called "Reishis".

The Alshich remarks that Bikkurim would not seem to be in anyone's list of the "top 3 mitzvos" and yet here this Medrash states that the world was created for the sake of this mitzvah! What is the meaning of this Medrash?

The Alshich answers that the mitzvah of Bikkurim contains within it something that is fundamental to being a human being -- the obligation for people to express their gratitude and hakaras haTov. HaKaras haTov is so basic and primary that the whole world's creation was actualized just for this mitzvah, which teaches us and trains us in the attribute of gratitude.

The Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer [Chapter 7] writes, "There is nothing harder for the Almighty to live with (as it were) than an ungrateful person. The reason Adam was exiled from the Garden of Eden was due to his ingratitude. His sin was not merely eating from the Tree of Knowledge (Etz HaDaas). For that sin alone, perhaps he could have remained in Gan Eden. The straw that broke the camel's back, so to speak, was the fact that in response to G-d's question why he ate from the Etz HaDaas, Adam said, "The woman you gave me, she gave me the fruit and I ate it." As Rashi points out, Adam was being ungrateful. G-d presented him Chava as a gift and Adam complained that she caused him to sin.

The Medrash continues that our ancestors in the Wilderness also angered G-d with their failure to recognize His Goodness towards them. They bemoaned the loss of the "good old days" in Egypt when they had melons, cucumbers, and garlic, and complained about the Mann.

The Medrash equates the sin of ingratitude with fundamental theological denial (kefira b'Ikar) of the Almighty. One who is ungrateful towards his fellow man is ultimately ungrateful towards the Almighty as well. One who is an ingrate to his boss, his friends, his spouse, his parents, and his neighbor will eventually come to deny the favors of the Almighty.

There are many stories about Gedolim. There are stories about their diligence in study; there are stories about their fear of Heaven; there are stories about their interpersonal kindness; there are stories about their sterling human character traits. These stories are all true in general (although each story about each particular Gadol may or may not be 100 percent accurate). However, regarding one attribute, we hear repeatedly how particularly careful the great men of Israel were about the attribute of HaKaras haTov.

If I look back to back to my days in Yeshiva and would be asked to summarize the themes that Rav Ruderman zt"l emphasized the most, number one would certainly be Torah learning (limud haTorah) but number 2 or 3 would have to be showing proper gratitude (being a "makir tova").

Gedolim practiced what they preached. I recently read a story about Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky. There was a young man in Torah VoDaath Yeshiva who was not coming to minyan [prayers]. The faculty tried all kinds of threats to force him to come to minyan, but it was not helping. They finally went to the Rosh Yeshiva, Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky, and asked him whether they could expel the boy from the dormitory. Rav Yaakov gave them permission to throw him out. They told the boy that he was expelled from the dorm until he started to come to minyan. Then they told him that the Rosh Yeshiva wanted to see him. The boy figured "Now I am really in trouble."

When he appeared before Rav Yaakov Kamentesky, the Rosh Yeshiva asked him: I understand that you have been thrown out of the dormitory. Where are you going to sleep? The boy told him that he did not have any alternate arrangements. Rav Yaakov told him, "I want you to sleep in my house." The boy was shocked and asked the Rosh Yeshiva to explain why on the one hand, he was throwing him out of the dormitory and on the other hand, he was inviting him to stay with him.

Rav Kaminetsky explained to the young man: "Your grandfather used to give money to the Kovno Kollel where I learned in Europe. Since I was a beneficiary of your grandfather's support to that Kollel, I owe you a favor and am glad I have the chance to pay it back in this fashion. True, I cannot let you sleep in the dormitory because you refuse to come to minyan, but you can sleep in my house, out of appreciation for what your grandfather did for me.

A similar incident is told with Rav Moshe Feinstein. Many years ago, Rav Moshe went to a wedding and gave the Choson an envelope with a wedding present. After the Sheva Brochos, the Choson and Kallah were opening their envelopes and they found a check from Rabbi Moses Feinstein from FDR

Drive in Manhattan for \$500 dollars. When this story took place, \$500 was an enormous amount for a wedding gift. The Choson told his father that he thought Rav Moshe must have added an extra zero on the check by mistake. The father, the choson, and the Kallah together went to Rav Moshe's apartment and asked the great Torah sage whether he in fact had made a mistake in writing the check. Rav Moshe said, "If I could, I would give you a check for \$5,000! Your grandfather was Rav Pessach Prushkin and I studied with your grandfather. I felt such gratitude to your zeida that I wanted to give you a big present; unfortunately I can't afford to give you more than \$500."

Rav Hutner used to conduct his Pessach Seder in a very serious mood. He treated it as a Divine Service and there was no levity or lightheadedness whatsoever. The atmosphere was like Yom Kippur. One year they had a guest who was somewhat of a jokester. He kibitzed, he joked around, and he acted more as if it was Purim than Yom KiPurim. Rav Shlomo Freifeld was a student of Rav Hutner and said that something had to be done about this fellow. He asked Rav Hutner for permission to throw the fellow out of the house. Rav Hutner said "No. This young man is a nephew of the Alter from Slabodka. If he wants to he can dance on the table, don't touch him!" (Rav Hutner in his youth had been a student of the Alter from Slabodka.) That is how fundamental Hakaras HaTov is. A person is only considered a "person" i.e. a mentsch when he appreciates all the many favors that the Almighty does for each one of us. No matter what the state of our life is, we are so indebted to the Ribono shel Olam for life itself.

The Chofetz Chaim said at the end of his life "G-d, I wrote the Mishneh Berura, I wrote the classic volume on Lashon HaRah, I wrote this and I wrote that (the Chofetz Chaim was a prolific writer). However, the Chofetz Chaim was not bragging. He is not saying, "G-d look how much I've done for You." On the contrary, he said "You, G-d, have given me the opportunity and the privilege to do all these things that I have done, now what can I do for You in exchange for all these privileges that You have given me?" This is someone who is Makir Tov. He goes through life recognizing all that has been done for him. This is fundamental to being a human being and that is why Bikkurim, which is called 'Reishis', ranks up there with "for the sake of Torah, which is called 'Reishis' and for the sake of Israel, which is called 'Reishis'."

This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah portion. The halachic topics dealt with in the portion of Ki Savo in the Commuter Chavrusah Series are the following:

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- 066 Learning Hebrew: Mitzvah or Not?
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