

# A Rabbi's Letter / RABBI CHAIM WASSERMAN

Rockleigh, NJ

February 12, 2018

and

Efrat, Erev Pesach, 5778

## [1]

"*Hakarat hatov*, appreciating the goodness that is done for us by another, and expressing our appreciation for that goodness" is not simply a rule of Jewish living, but is a character trait that must be learned, developed and practiced throughout one's life. For the civilized person, in Jewish thought, it stands at the top of the list of human traits.

"There are multiple places in the Torah where we learn this most important trait of *hakarat hatov* – towards people, and even to animals and inanimate objects. This extraordinarily human trait the Torah requires of every person to integrate into one's personality, thoughts, speech and actions.

Intrinsically bound to the appreciation required of a person is the concept of *chessed* ("ch" is a guttural sound like in Johann Sebastian Bach) which translates best as extending some act of kindness – in any form - to another person. Upon receiving that kindness, the recipient is expected to recognize that *hakarat hatov* ought to be forthcoming.

And all this means very much more than just a simple perfunctory "thank you".

## [2]

We are created as social animals which, by definition, means that humans can only exist by acting one way or another in consonance and cooperation with others. In fact, the Torah tells us from the outset of creation that when man was created, God said, "It is not good for man to be alone...", he needs a helpmate with whom to live.

To live, in one way or another, others contribute in some way to one's sustenance. Take as an example the very bread we eat. How did it come to our table? First, the wheat had to be grown and harvested; the kernels have then to be made into flour and then baked; on and on until we finally have the bread on our table.

Because of this social situation in which we all exist there will be times, the Torah relates, when someone known to you will come upon economic difficulty and is in desperate need of assistance. The Torah insists that the one in need has a right to ask for assistance from the more fortunate one. And the fortunate one is mandated to warmly respond (*Devarim 15*)

## [3]

But how far does *hakarat hatov* extend?

Rabbi Yeruchem haLevi Levovitz. (1873-1936), known by his hundreds of students simply as *The Mashgiach*, was a famous *mashgiach ruchani*, spiritual master and *ba'al mussar*, a Jewish ethicist at the famed Mir Yeshiva in Poland.

He taught: Recall how Egypt enslaved us and subjected us with 210 years of excruciating slave labor. Nonetheless, the Torah insists not to revile Egyptians since initially we came to Egypt because of an extended and severe famine in Canaan. When that famine could not be borne any longer, Yaakov and his entire family were then hosted by the ruling Pharaoh in Goshen. As a result, the family survived and flourished.

After three generations, the Torah instructs, one may marry an Egyptian who converted properly to Judaism despite the nefarious past of his/her ancestors. (*Devarim 23*)

Consider this. Based on this teaching of Reb Yerucham, what do we do two and three generations after Russian pogroms and the Holocaust? How in the near future – even now? – are we to relate to the Russian tyranny and even more recently Nazi Germany? After all, we unquestionably flourished in both empires for a millennium and more

To this gut-wrenching dilemma, in light of Rav Yerucham's teaching, I have no answer. This problem has plagued me for decades and I have not resolved it as yet (if ever). Clearly, I avoided the issue throughout all my decades as a practicing rabbi in Passaic NJ. How else could I have dealt with it when one-third of the congregation, at its inception, were first generation Holocaust survivors. Four times a year, heartbroken I would lead the congregation in *Yizkor* memorial services naming their parents and grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins – and children.

## [4]

So much of our *Siddur's* liturgy contain lessons in *hakarat hatov*. *Tehillim 100* is a prime example. Recited every morning, it is worthy of careful examination for what *hakarat hatov* is all about.

Then there is a rather unusual part in *Modim*, towards the end of the *Amidah*, a *berachah* entirely of *hakarat hatov*, where, as the *chazzan* recites that *berachah* aloud, the congregation responds with an alternate version, recited at the very same time. The Talmud records four different opinions of what the congregation ought to say here, but concludes that all four opinions are worthy of being recited, therefore, all versions should be combined into a single passage since all of these four suggestions clearly express *hakarat hatov* to Gd. (*Sotah* 40a)

## [5]

Finally, let me tell you what pushed me to formulate these shared lines with you at this time. Aside from all else, I have a strong, personal ulterior motive which may not interest some of you.

On January 10, 2018 my wife and I were in final preparations packing to leave for Newark Airport, returning to Israel after a once-in-a-lifetime family *simchah* in New Jersey. After last minute shopping, I returned to our daughter's and son-in-law's home where we stayed. I exited an Uber car, firmly planting my right leg and cane on the ground but my left foot felt slight resistance on the bottom of the open car door causing me to lose my balance; I fell, landing on my right side. Instantly I realized that I was in big trouble.

The town's Hatzalah of Passaic-Clifton, the volunteer emergency medical core, was at my side within moments; they had me in an ambulance and on my way to Hackensack Medical Center for surgery on my broken right femur.

From then on for the next two months there were teams of people who worked feverishly for my recuperation in two New Jersey rehabilitation facilities. I list numerous name here, not for your benefit, if you are still reading, but for me always to remember who they were and to whom I owe endless *hakarat hatov* for all they did for me.

Mordy and Moshe, Hatzalah EMS volunteers, cared for me from the moment I fell until I was hospitalized; then, once again transported me to JFK airport as I began my trip home.

My children instantly created a coordinated command central, from Passaic to Pittsburgh to Efrat, caring for the myriad administrative issues with insurances, complicated by the fact that they were dealing here with international issues. Daniel, Adina and Shloimi were with me days, nights, Shabbat. For Tu biShevat, Dini and Shloimi came with all of the necessary foodstuffs for a Tu biShevat Seder. One month later, Purim day, they arranged a minyan for me with family members of my New Jersey brothers, Saul and Ben. *Megillat Esther* was flawlessly read by a young fellow Dovi Goldberg, who just celebrated his Bar Mitzvah and whose parents are leading members of Young Israel of Passaic.

I was hospitalized in three top-rated facilities: surgery was at Hackensack Medical Center where Dr. Julie Keller, voted by her colleagues as top-notch surgeon, performed the surgery. Daniel spent several days and nights in a lounge chair at my bedside while Shloimi was with me throughout Shabbat

I was then released to the number-one rated acute rehab facility in New Jersey, Kessler of West Orange. Here I was assigned to five therapists, young ladies who were so professionally trained – Sami, Eva, Marylynne, Rebecca and Christine. There were no days off. With them I learned to walk, to ascend stairs, to properly get in and out of a car. (If I knew what they taught me I would never have fallen to begin with.) Dr Elinor Anin was on top of all medical issues with me. No amount of praise and *hakarat hatov* can suffice when I recall the work of Avi Laub and Barry Geiger who visited around the facility daily before they went to work to assist those who would need help in putting on *tallit* and *tefillin*. And on Shabbat they would walk with friends and students to organize a minyan. No cold weather would stop their trek of over two miles.

The second rehab facility was the Jewish Home of Rockleigh, NJ on the northern border of New Jersey and New York State. What a magnificent campus! Here I was assigned to three very fine therapists (incidentally all from "our tribe) Jeffery, Reizy and Beatrice. The director of all rehabilitation here, Alana, was a young lady who decades ago lived in Passaic, was friend of Adina and visited her in our home every Shabbat afternoon. (Imagine the screaming when they met after some thirty years.) Joseph, a RN, and Tanveer, a nurse aide from Pakistan, were available for anything I needed every day. Joseph wants to visit in Israel while Tanveer expressed the desire to come work in Jerusalem. Rabbi Simon Feld was the full-time chaplain who, among a host of regular rabbinic duties, maintains throughout the entire facility a fully RCBC certified kosher kitchen. Shabbat *Kiddush* with "the Rabbi" is an absolute delight. Eric was a most gracious and highly efficient social worker. Saul/Sandy, Ben/Bonnie, my brothers and their wives were there with all sorts of goodies for me.

On March 7<sup>th</sup> I arrived home. As I conclude these lines I have spent three entire weeks of care at home, in my own bed and with all of my books, where Leah, my wife of 58 years, and Hillel, my heroic son, have been at my beck-and-call 24/7 in a manner that I will never be able to repay them.

As for me, I have the good fortune of having Jerry, a highly professional, call him a body builder, with whom I work daily. As a result, he has given my hands, waist and legs new life. My walking is different, my ability to get up and down is totally different, and I am doing things with my legs that are not to be believed.

*You see now how indebted I am to so many as I sit down to our Pesach Seder 5778 at home in Efrat. Chag same'ach.*

[3] We got to get a shidduch for Naamah