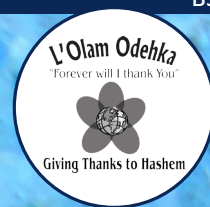


KOL TODA

Gateways to Gratitude: Giving Thanks to Hashem



COUNTING THE SEFIRA GRATEFULLY

When discussing expression of gratitude to Hashem, one of the most frequently asked questions is: how can one's appreciation of Hashem's kindnesses grow when faced with ongoing difficulties? How can one feel grateful when suffering seems like an endless tunnel? This question can be answered through taking a deeper look into the mitzva of *Sefiras HaOmer*.

The author of *Sefer HaChinuch* (Mitzva 306) writes that the holy Torah is the essence of *Am Yisrael*. It was primarily for the purpose of receiving the Torah that we were freed from our Egyptian exile. We were therefore commanded to count the days, from the day after the first *yom tov* of Pesach until Shavuot – the day the Torah was given at Sinai. Through this act of counting we show our great desire, our longing, to reach the holy day of receiving the Torah, just as a slave would earnestly count the days towards his freedom.

The *sefer Zechuta D'Avraham* relates a story that can illustrate this point:

The holy rabbi Dov Ber of Radoshitz, *zy"a*, was once staying in a house that had an interesting clock hanging on the wall. As clocks often did, it would chime every time it struck the hour. When hearing the chimes of this clock, however, he would feel a strangely joyous sensation. He was perturbed. What was it about the chiming that caused him such happiness? He went to ask the owner. After hearing that the clock had previously been in the possession of the *Chozeh* of Lublin, *zy"a*, he said, "Now I understand. All the clocks in the world chime to tell people that their time in this world is coming to an end and their life is ebbing away. Every hour will never return, and, although the thought is an important one, for it hastens people to do *teshuvah* and to fill their time with important matters, it does have certain sadness to it, for it reminds them of their impending death.

"But the *Chozeh* of Lublin's clock," he pronounced, "it announces good tidings! Every one of its strokes produces a sound of happiness and joy, because it tells us that with each passing hour, the *galus* is also shortened by an hour. *Yidden* are in pain, they are suffering terribly! There are people who want to give up but they should listen to the clock – the *galus* has gotten shorter, we are coming closer and closer to the *geula shleima*, the Final Redemption! Soon, *Mashiach tzidkenu* will come to redeem us! I could not sleep from sheer excitement and danced of happiness all night long!"

This idea can apply to *Sefiras HaOmer*. With our tremendous desire to reach the day of receiving the Torah, we joyfully and thankfully count the days of the *Omer* that have passed, as if also proclaiming: "We are so happy to be one day closer to the eternal *simcha*."

Now we can answer the question we began with: One who strives to find the wherewithal to thank Hashem even in times of hardship, should focus on *emuna*, on internalizing that each pain will end, every suffering has a final date, after which he will enjoy open gates to happiness and blessing. Everything in the world is precisely run by Divine Providence, and therefore every minute of suffering gone by has actually brought him closer to the joy of redemption. May we merit a Counting that is all gratitude....

WITH YOU, I THANK

Once there was a king who had a Jewish advisor whom he loved dearly. Indeed, he loved him so much that he appointed him his chief advisor. The other ministers were jealous of him and whispered to the king that the Jew was a charlatan – he didn't truly care about his king. They suggested that the king test his court-Jew by asking him to host a big feast in the king's honor.

The king liked their idea and ordered the Jew to host a large feast for all the king's servants and all the king's men. The advisor spent a lot of his money and energy preparing the feast, but throughout the whole evening his face looked pinched and upset.

The other ministers took this as a sign that they had been correct. "The minister was upset because he had to spend his money on a banquet in honor of the king! The king's honor is not important enough for him to spend his money on!" The ministers suggested that as a follow-up test, just to make sure, the king should order another feast, this time paid by the royal coffers. The king agreed and ordered another banquet from his Jewish advisor, all expenses paid in advance.

This time, the Jew's face shined with joy.

The king called his advisor. "I see that my honor is not an important enough cause for spending your money on," he said, accusingly. The Jewish advisor shook his head, aghast, and stammered, "I want to tell you the truth... who am I, I am nothing. I... I was afraid in the first feast that I didn't properly fulfill my duty to the crown, because I did not have enough money for a more elaborate banquet. But the second time, when it was you, your honor, who paid for it all, and you gave me as much as I needed, I was then able to go all out and make a feast fit for a king. I was able to honor you, my king, and therefore I was happy..."

We say in the prayer of *Nishmas Kol Chai*: "*Ilu finu... If our mouths were as full of song as the sea, and our tongues as full of joyful praise as its waves... When we feel that the mouth, tongue, and lips are ours, we then cannot possibly praise Hashem properly. But when we say, "...the organs **You** have placed within us and spirit and soul **You** have blown into our nostrils..."*, we are acknowledging that the body is all from **You, Hashem**, from the Royal Craftsman, and then – "...they will thank and bless..."

Only then can we successfully thank Hashem....



A WORD OF GRATITUDE

The *Zohar* on *Parashas Naso* (127:1) tells us that when David HaMelech saw through *ruach hakodesh* the judgments one would undergo upon leaving this world, he said (*Tehillim* 103:1): "Bless, my soul, Hashem..." – **before** leaving this world, while you are still within the body – "...& all my innards, His holy Name" – while my spirit is still with you, bless Hashem – before you will no longer be able to thank Him & bless Him.

COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS – A PERSONAL ACCOUNT

I had to be shaken really bad so it should happen. I had to be hit hard so my heart would crack open. But let me start at the beginning.

My name is Arye. When I was a little pipsqueak of a boy – only four years old – people used the word 'drive' when talking about me. Listening to the adult conversation, I didn't know what they meant. I thought you only drove a car (which I certainly didn't – at least not then), but the desire to accomplish more, to get bigger and better – with that I was definitely familiar. I remember the pride in my father's eyes after meeting my rebbe at PTA meetings. He would thump me on the shoulder approvingly and say, "Arye will do great things. He is always striving to reach higher and do better." It was true. When my friends in class were still struggling to master *kria*, I was memorizing *mishnayos* with my older brothers. When that wasn't enough, I started learning *Gemara*. My classmates, though, were still learning the right way to hold a book.

As the years went by, my drive propelled me further and further. I finished eighth grade with honors and wanted to be accepted to the best yeshiva high school in the country, a yeshiva for gifted children. The desire was so strong that it filled my entire being until there was room for nothing else in my brain. I studied my eyes out, day and night. Two days after the *faher* I got an answer – I was accepted. As I was holding the acceptance letter in my hand I did not feel joy, not even for a second. Before walking through the front door I had already set my eyes on my next goal. I would get a head-start on yeshiva. Orientation would find me with a few hundred *dapim* of *gemara* under my belt. I would know more than anyone else in yeshiva. I sat and learned until that, too, was done. After learning what I had chosen I did not stop for a minute. I was already setting my next goal.

When I got married I set my eyes on a certain teaching position. When I landed the coveted position I never stopped to appreciate that I succeeded. I just set my next goal – writing and publishing deep, well-thought-out articles, making myself famous. And I did just that.

When my family grew we searched for larger living quarters and, as usual, I found something just right – in good condition, low rent, good location. Again, I didn't stop to appreciate it; I just went on... how can we make it nicer, how to find schools for the kids, etc.

Hashem practically poured buckets of candies on me and I, yes little Arye, never raised my eyes up to the heavens to thank Him for them... to thank Hashem for every assistance, every success, everything that worked out just right. I just spent my life running to catch the next gift waiting for me.

Then, one day, Hashem decided to send me a reality check. I found little pebbles falling on me instead of candy, tiny rocks that soon turned into large ones. And they hurt. Today I understand that they were sent in order to make me look up and understand, once and for all, who it was that was throwing things on my path... to make me understand that for every gift, I must stop for a moment and say the priceless words – thank You.

Thank You to my Father in Heaven, Who gave me, Who loves me, Who sends things my way.

It started with minor health problems with my son, and went on to our landlord, who gave us a two-week eviction notice. The rent had recently gone up in our neighborhood and it was hard to find anything for the money we had. Then my boss told me they were having financial difficulties, forcing them to lay off some staff... that's right – me.

I sat on the sofa in my living room and cried. For the first time in my life I was experiencing failures, one after the next. I started thinking about my life and the pictures ran through my mind – success after success. I felt a burning shame. There had been so much good, so many gifts in my life. Did I ever stop to thank Hashem

for them? I thought about myself as a little boy learning *Gemara* when my friends had barely mastered the *alef-beis*. I thought about how I got accepted to the most prestigious yeshiva in the country without batting an eyelash. "Did you ever stop to thank Hashem for that wonderful opportunity you got?" the question resounded inside my head. "Did you ever thank Hashem for the wonderful family that sits around your Shabbos table every week?" I thought to myself, picturing my beautiful children. "Did you ever thank Hashem for the comfortable house, reasonable rent, and good location?" The very walls of my living room seemed to mock me. I sat there, bent over, totally embarrassed. I was utterly disgusted with myself. How could I have taken those things, all gifts from Hashem, without saying thank You, not even once! And I still had the audacity to ask for more, more, more!

Suddenly, the tears came. Good, cleansing tears. They poured out of the depth of my being. I started right then and there – from the day I was born. I thanked Hashem for each and every one of His kindnesses I could think of, and for the first time in my life I felt clean, like paying up an old debt.

When the phone started ringing that night, it was for good things. The first call was a *nachas* call from my son's *rebbe*. Then, another house that we had really wanted suddenly became vacant, and I got another job offer. But the greatest gift of all from Hashem was the gift of understanding. The deep understanding that when one receives a gift from Hashem one stops and says simply: "Thank You." Thank You to a loving Father Who watches over me and takes care of me.

That night, coming home from *Ma'ariv*, I finally understood why we count the *Omer* the way we do. Shouldn't we have been counting the days left, how much more there is to go, what we still need to achieve? Isn't that the way one counts when waiting for something? But no. *Chazal* wanted to teach us to look back and see how far we have already come, before attempting to climb any farther. Stop and take a look at what you already have accomplished! Yes, we are certainly aiming for bigger and better, higher and higher, but first we stop. Look back – and thank Hashem. That's why we count how much we have already done – *hayom tisha yamim, asara yamim...*

I hope my story's message resounds with the readers, so that we all remember to always look back with gratefulness, to appreciate Hashem's kindnesses, to thank Hashem and praise Him for it all, and to ask for His aid to keep going, higher and higher, bigger and better.



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