

Gratitude: Both an Interpersonal and Religious Value

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It would appear that Moshe was very fortunate to have a father-in-law like Yitro. The most obvious contribution that Yitro makes to Moshe's development as a leader is described in *Shemot* 18. When he observes how Moshe spends the majority of his time adjudicating disputes among the masses in the encampment, he urges his son-in-law:

Shemot 18:19-21

And now listen to my voice and I will advise you, and God will be with you. You should be for the people the one who stands before God, and you will bring the matters before God.

And you will adjure them (the people) concerning the statutes and the laws, and you will make known to them the path in which they are to walk and the deeds that they should do.

And you will identify among the people men of valor, who are God-fearing, men who are honest, disdainful of bribery, and you will place over them (the people) masters/judges of the thousands, masters of the hundreds, master of the fifties and masters of the tens.

While most think of the recommendation to delegate to others the responsibilities to take care of all but the most complicated legal cases, the Rabbis noted that Yitro was also emphasizing the type of specific instruction that Moshe should offer the people:

Bava Kamma 99a

R. Yosef taught: ..."the path"—this refers to acts of kindness; "they are to walk"—this refers to visiting the sick; "in" (which they are to walk)—this refers to burial; "and the deeds"—this refers to the law; "that they should do"—this refers to beyond the letter of the law.

Obviously, Yitro understood that Moshe must continue to be the intermediary between God and the people whenever there are new *Mitzvot* to be presented and discussed. However, by the Talmud attributing to Yitro a concern that Moshe strive to assure that the Jewish people engage in acts of kindness and piety, a new aspect of Yitro's personality is highlighted, namely the importance of *Mitzvot Bein Adam LeChaveiro* (Commandments between man and man.) And if we see the issues of resolving controversies and promoting positive interrelationships among the people as interrelated, then Yitro appears to be focused not only upon what to do **after** a

dispute has arisen, but also how might a significant number of these unpleasantnesses and misunderstandings be avoided in the first place.

R. Chaim Sabbato¹ identifies this particular orientation in Yitro's character the first time he is mentioned in the Tora, in *Parashat Shemot*. Upon his daughters returning from watering the family's sheep, the following interchange is recorded:

Shemot 2:18-20

...And he said: Why did you hurry to come today?

And they said: An Egyptian man saved us from the hands of the shepherds, and he also surely drew water for us and watered the flock.

And he said to his daughters: And where is he? Why did you abandon the man? Call him and he will eat bread.

R. Sabbato, p. 104

This train of thought teaches us who Yitro was—someone who was “*Makir Tova*” (lit. recognizing goodness; being appreciative, grateful.) It was clear to him that it is impossible to forsake someone who saved his daughters.

Although at first glance, the emotion of “gratitude” would seem admirable and indicative of high character, there are cynics who suggest that ulterior motives accompany the expression of such an emotion:

“In most of mankind gratitude is merely a secret hope for greater favors.”—Francois, Sixth Duc de la Rochefoucauld.²

“Gratitude: n. A sentiment lying midway between a benefit received and a benefit expected.”—Ambrose Bierce.³

In other words, expressions of appreciation and gratitude, particularly within earshot of the one who is being thanked, might constitute a subtle stratagem intended to elicit additional favors. And a particular Rabbinic interpretation of Yitro's words to his daughters would seem to bear out the sentiment expressed by de la Rochefoucauld and Bierce:

RaShI on *Shemot* 2:20 d.h. “*VeYochal Lechem*” (based on *Shemot Rabba* 1:32)

Perhaps he will marry one of you, as it is said, (*Beraishit* 39:6) “And he (Potiphar) entrusted all that he had to Yosef, and withheld from

¹ “*HaMakir BeTovato Shel Chaveiro*” in *Ahavat Tora, Yediot Acharonot*, 2000, pp. 103-107.

² Maximes, no. 298, 1678, in *The Yale Book of Quotations*, ed. Fred Shapiro, Yale U. Press, New Haven, 2006, p. 443.

³ Wasp, 28 May, 1885, in *Ibid.*, p. 80.

him nothing except 'the bread that he ate' ..." (*RaShI* on 39:6, based upon *Beraishit Rabba* 86:6, interprets this phrase as a euphemism referring to Potiphar's wife, leading to the attribution to Yitro of a parallel reference to possible marriage between Moshe and one of the daughters were he to be invited to their home.)

However, the rule "*Ein Mikra Yotzei MiYedai Peshuto*" (no biblical text should be understood contrary to its simple literal meaning)⁴ should not be ignored, allowing us, as well as R. Sabato, to insist that Yitro's gratitude was pure and unadulterated.

R. Eliyahu Dessler⁵ makes an astute observation concerning those who naturally feel true gratitude, in contrast to those who do not:

Recognize that there is the "giver" and the "taker".

The "giver" feels in his heart that he is not desirous of any gifts, because his aspiration is solely to give, and not to draw towards him that which is not his. Consequently, when he receives something from his friend, the feeling awakens within him to repay the favor, and if he is unable to physically do so, his heart feels the obligation of repayment—and this is what is known as "*Hoda'ah*" (thanks.)

But the "taker" continually aspires to draw to him all that he can, whether by means of thievery, deception or receiving gifts. And in the depths of his heart, he believes that everything belongs to him and is for him. Consequently, when he receives something good from his friend, he feels no need to compensate whatsoever. He is what is referred to as "*Kaphui Tov*" (denying goodness.) And if you observe the "taker" as giving thanks, and sometimes he does it admirably well, do not believe in him and his thankfulness, because he is merely flattering by means of his lips, while his heart is not in it. However, in his desire to draw to himself additional myriad goodnesses and important gifts, he takes on the trappings of the "*Makir HaTov*." Therefore, even his thanksgiving is in fact a taking, since this is his intention.

R. Sabato notes that just as Yitro serves as a positive exemplar of one who acknowledges kindnesses that he receives, two Egyptians in the biblical narrative serve as foils representing the opposite, or who are classic "takers." Firstly, despite Pharaoh's butler receiving from Yoseph a fortuitous interpretation of his dream whereby the prediction that the royal servant will be restored to his position comes true, the Tora nevertheless notes:

Beraishit 40:23

And the butler did not remember Yosef and he forgot him.⁶

⁴ See e.g., *Yevamot* 24a.

⁵ *Michtav MeiEliyahu*, Vol. 1, Chapt. 11 "*Hakarot HaTov*," *Shem*, Tel Aviv, 5725, pp. 46-7.

But even more egregiously, at least according to one view, Pharaoh deliberately rewrites Egyptian history to negate the immense contribution that Yosef had made towards saving Egypt from terrible famine.

Shemot 1:8

And there arose a new Pharaoh that did not know Yosef.

Sota 11a

He consciously gave the impression as if he completely did not know Yosef.

Apparently to preserve the illusion that one owes nothing to another, particularly when one might feel that he actually does, simply denying the other's existence serves as a handy psychological tactic.⁷

The virtue of being an altruistic “giver” rather than a self-absorbed “taker” calls to mind a famous quotation from a recent inaugural address. In contrast to purely political speeches that politicians often make, there are other speeches that potentially can have a profound effect on society as a whole as well as the culture of such a society. In a recent column, Anna Quindlen wrote,⁸ “No one should underestimate what a succession of inspired **secular sermons** can mean in a time of civic darkness.” It was in just such a “secular sermon” that John F. Kennedy⁹ called upon the American people as well as the whole of humanity to be “givers” rather than “takers”:

And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country. My fellow citizens of the world: ask not what America can do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man.

⁶ The Rabbis, as reflected in *RaShI*'s commentary, suggest that the butler's forgetting was a supernatural punishment to Yosef for asking to be remembered and hopefully released from prison (*Beraishit* 40:14)—he should have had trust in God rather than depended upon the kindness of the butler—once again R. Sabbato reads the text in a more naturalistic fashion, understanding that once the butler had received a benefit from Yosef, he did not feel beholden towards him any longer.

⁷ It appears, according to R. Sabbato, that despite how poorly we were treated in Egypt, the objective fact that we benefited from Egypt's hospitality during the period of famine in Canaan, is cited by the Tora as evidence that we must even be thankful for the kindnesses, however few and far between they may have been, extended to us by our bitter enemies:

Devarim 23:8

You must not despise the Egyptian because you were a sojourner in his land.

RaShI

They offered you a place to live during difficult times.

⁸ “Era of Good Speaking” in *Newsweek*, January 19, 2009, p. 60.

⁹ Inaugural Address, 20 January, 1961, in *The Yale Book of Quotations*, p. 16. No less than eleven separate quotations appear from that speech, reflecting the extent to which its sentiments continue to resonate more than twenty five years later.

The quality of both giving and being wholeheartedly appreciative for that which one receives is not only a matter of civic virtue, but also an important rule of thumb with respect to interactions with one's family, friends, community and people. We would do well to heed Yitro's teachings to both his daughters and son-in-law in this regard.

But R. Sabbato takes the theme of "*Hakarat HaTov*" even further, suggesting that such a quality not only plays a crucial role in proper interpersonal relationships, but also the manner in which one relates to God Himself. He cites the following Midrash, quoted in the *Halachic* compendium *Chaye Adam*,¹⁰ as the basis for his contention:

Chaye Adam, Part I, Rule 67, #2

...The Rabbis have said: All who deny the goodness done to them by their friend, in the end will deny the goodness Done to them by the Holy One, Blessed Be He.¹¹

In this regard too, the commentator suggests, Yitro serves as the paradigm for this rule in terms of his specific reaction to merely hearing about the miracles that God Performed on behalf of the Jewish people in order to Extract them from Egypt:

Shemot 18:1, 8, 10

And Yitro, priest of Midyan and father-in-law of Moshe heard all that God had Done on behalf of Moshe and Israel His People, with respect to God's Taking out Israel from Egypt...

And Moshe recounted to his father-in-law everything that God had Done to Pharoah and Egypt on behalf of Israel, all of the difficulties that happened to them along the way, and how God Saved them...

And Yitro said: **Blessed is God** Who Saved you from Egypt and from Pharoah, that He Saved the people from being subjugated to Egypt.

In effect, a symbiosis can be recognized linking *Mitzvot Bein Adam LeChaveiro* (Commandments between man and man) with *Mitzvot Bein Adam LeMakom* (Commandments between man and God). Not only does a heightened awareness of God's Existence as well as the contents of the Tora that He has Commanded us influence us to treat our fellow man justly, kindly and with respect, but our appreciation of our fellow man's kindnesses extended towards us, make us that much more sensitive to the tremendous *Chasadim* (kindnesses) that God Showers upon us. Such a realization even transforms our *Tefillot* (prayers) from words uttered mechanically to sentiments welling up from the depths of our very souls. A particular prayer that is recited on Shabbat morning, immediately before "*Barchu*"

¹⁰ I have searched for the original source, but have been unable to locate it.

¹¹ Although it does not appear in the *Chaye Adam*, R. Sabbato quotes the converse of this rule as well, i.e., Whomever appreciates/ is graceful for the good deeds of his friend, will in the end appreciate the good deeds of The Holy One, Blessed Be He.

represents for me the quintessential expression of how we are supposed to think about God's Largesse.¹²

Were our mouth as full of song as the sea, and our tongue as full of joyous song as the multitude of waves, and our lips as full of praise as the breadth of the heavens, and our eyes as brilliant as the sun and the moon, and our hands as outspread as the eagles of the sky, and our feet as swift as antelopes, we still could not thank you sufficiently, *HaShem*, Our God and God of our fathers, and to bless Your Name for even one of the thousand thousands, thousands of thousands, and myriad myriads of favors that You have Performed for our ancestors and for us...¹³

For us to appreciate the tremendous kindnesses involved in being alive, appreciating our families, friends and community, to be able to share and participate in *Semachot* like the birth of a child, the wedding of a *Chatan and Kalla*, a *Bar* or *Bat Mitzva*, the party marking the completion of a volume of our primary sources, should deepen our sense of appreciation for one another as well as *HaShem*.

¹² Prayer should be viewed not only as a means for our expressing feelings that we already possess, but also a resource that develops our awareness to things that we may not have realized or thought of previously. Consequently, our liturgy should not only be recited and sung, but also studied and reflected upon.

¹³ ArtScroll *Siddur*, p. 403.