RABBI
SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the home

PARSHAS PINCHAS

SHOWING APPRECIATION

When Moshe Rabbeinu asks Hashem to appoint a *manhig* to succeed him after Moshe's passing, he addresses Hashem as *"Elokei Haruchos."* When Yehoshua is appointed, he is described as *"Ish asher ruach bo."* The Imrei Noam brings a Gemara in Berachos (17:1), *"Retzoneinu laasos retzon Malkeinu, rak se'or sheba'isah me'akev* – We want to do our King's will, but the *yetzer hora* gets in the way." The Imrei Noam explains that *ruach* is related to the word *ratzon*. The *yetzer hora* gets in the way only at the point of *lema'aseh* – actual performance. The *yetzer hora* doesn't usually make us *want* to do bad things. We still want to do the right thing. Moshe Rabbeinu asked Hashem, Who knows our true desires, to accept those desires, our good intentions. That was why he asked Hashem to appoint a leader who would know how to direct the *retzonos* of Klal Yisroel, as *ratzon* is such a central aspect of our *avodas Hashem*.

The well-known expression tells us that, "The way to Gehinom is paved with good intentions." Where *mitzvos bein adam le'Makom* are concerned, that is not so. You can earn Gan Eden due to having the right intentions. However, when it comes to *bein adam lachaveiro*, even the sincerest intentions are not enough. People cannot see into our hearts. "My wife complains that I don't do XYZ enough – doesn't she realize how much I would like to?" That just doesn't work. The XYZ has to be clearly visible, whether that means in words or deeds. If you're on the receiving end, however, and you're aware of the other person's good intentions or genuine attempts to do the right thing, you should acknowledge their sincerity. If someone is trying to make you happy and genuinely means well, of course you should note their good intentions and express your appreciation. (This also motivates them to try harder next time.) But as a giver, intentions aren't enough. Only actions produce the full effect.

This essay is dedicated in honor of the Upsherin of Yitzchok Wertheimer נ"י
May Hashem grant his parents much Nachas from him and all his siblings!!

Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

Thank you so much for your classes, which are full of helpful advice, and I'm sure they take a lot of energy, time, and courage to deliver. There are topics that you cover that others don't touch and your clarity is extremely helpful.

I very often feel underappreciated at home. My wife tells me that I'm needy for acknowledgement and appreciation. I know that in other relationships and outside my house I do not feel this way, but she claims that some people only need it at home and that it's unhealthy. The way I see it, I do a lot for my wife and family, always offering more and trying my best, and very infrequently do I really get thanked for it. When I tell her that she should express appreciation, the way I do to her, she tells me that she never asked me for my help, didn't really need what I did, or else she tries to show me how I was going to do it anyway and didn't really mean her. Should I just drop the case or is there something I can do about this? Is it my problem, hers, or nobody's?

On a similar note, a follow-up question was received related to an answer given several weeks ago (see parshas Chukas):

Thank you for the answer you gave. I have a follow-up question. What happens when the nature of a recipient makes it hard for them to initiate *and* appreciate? I believe a woman is allowed to show appreciation, otherwise what's the point of giving if the recipient is not appreciative?

Appreciation can be shown explicitly or in a more subtle way, but a complete lack of appreciation discourages the giver and makes him feel terrible. It seems to me that there is a barrier that won't allow her to become vulnerable. Feeling like this is a one-way street and defeats the purpose of trying to give in the first place.

Answer:

In my answer this week I'm going to break with my usual practice of only addressing the person asking the question, with the added cautionary note that each person must focus on the parts that pertain to him if he wants to make progress. It's so much easier to comprehend what your spouse, or child, needs to fix, but focusing on the other person is not just unhelpful – it actually paralyzes you and prevents you from taking action in the areas that are under your control.

The feeling of being underappreciated in a relationship is very unpleasant. I did not focus on this in my previous article as I wanted to discuss other points pertaining to the intimate parts of a marriage relationship, but appreciation is always important. On occasion you may have a genuine reason for not saying thank you, and you may have meant to show appreciation. But while Hashem knows your good intentions, people invariably need to experience the actual expression of gratitude in order to believe in the feeling behind it.

In this case, it's a husband writing in but I'm addressing any person who isn't showing appreciation, as this is not a gender issue, and

I'm going to be absolutely blunt: It's dead wrong not to express appreciation! No excuses, no justifications, no claiming that "he was going to do it anyway and didn't mean me." Even if that's true, you should still express your thanks, but how much more so when someone *does* do something especially for you.

People who find it difficult to express their appreciation will often find it easy to come up with reasons to justify it. *I didn't need it. He did it for himself. It's not what I wanted anyway. It's normal to do it. It's expected. He didn't have to. I never asked for it…* Be honest, and admit that you are not really focusing on the other person's behavior – you're just trying to justify your own. Please, don't fool yourself. It's so easy to get into the habit of reacting this way and to lose all sense of appreciation for what you receive from others.

The same is true with the justification of *who needs it anyway? You mean you NEED a thank you?? How old are you?* Don't blame the other person for being needy because it's hard for you to be vulnerable. There is something very wrong with the mindset of looking for reasons not to have to be grateful, and it does much subtle damage to a relationship.

Someone once told me that his wife was going out to an event and was planning to take her baby along. He told her she could leave the baby home as he was babysitting the other children anyway. She went out, had a good time, but didn't thank her husband when she came home. When he mentioned it, she replied, "I could have taken the baby along." Who was she trying to fool? Her husband had clearly made the offer for her, and she had clearly benefited from it.

People may avoid expressing appreciation for a variety of reasons. A person with fragile self-esteem may find it hard to be a "taker" and prefer to pretend that they didn't need the favor in the first place. For others, it's the feeling of being indebted that is so unpalatable. Neither reason justifies a failure to show gratitude, however.

In the first case, it's important to realize that relationships are built on give-and-take, and being needy is part of that. You may feel better about yourself if you are always the giver – but the same applies to your spouse. I often advise husbands to *davka* ask for favors in order to give their wives the pleasure of feeling needed, and to open up the opportunity for thanking them afterward. This even applies if it's something you know your spouse is probably already doing, such as asking for supper to be ready on time – just so that you can thank your wife for doing so.

In the second case of the person who fears becoming indebted, this is based on a misunderstanding of how relationships work. You don't become indebted to someone just because they did something for you. If the other person does view the situation in that way, then it's a serious problem that should be dealt with – however, this is not a justification for refraining from showing gratitude.

When it comes to the more intimate parts of a relationship, it's even more important to express appreciation in a healthy and subtle way. Trying to convince oneself and one's spouse that, *"I don't need this, it's not for me"* is wrong about any aspect of a relationship, and certainly the more delicate issues within it. Part of what makes a relationship tick is the balance between give and take. Rejecting what your spouse offers you is incredibly hurtful. If it's hard for you to express or show appreciation, at least acknowledge that. Someone once related to me a very revealing incident with a little girl who hurt her friend. "Go tell her you're sorry," the mother told her – but when the girl went over to her friend, what she said was, "Do you forgive me?" Her mother asked why she chose those words, to which the little girl innocently replied, "It's easier for me to ask her to forgive me than to say I'm sorry."

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For some of us, saying "thank you" can feel just as horrible as saying "I'm sorry." Now we know that we have to say it, regardless, but that's only half the story. Showing appreciation isn't just for the giver's benefit. It's for the recipient too.

In his discussion of the *mitzvah* of *Lo sekallel chairaish* – not cursing a deaf person, the Rambam explains that when a person curses someone, it feeds his own negativity and anger. The *mitzvah* is clearly not referring to the impact on the person being cursed; the fact that the Torah specifies a deaf person indicates that the problem is the impact cursing someone has on the perpetrator. The same applies to showing appreciation. Getting into the way of saying thank you will turn you into a grateful person, a better person.

I was recently invited to join a Shabbaton for *bochurim*. I made a point of going over to each *baal tefillah*, the *bochur* who cooked the meals, the ones who sang, etc. and thanking each of them, loudly enough for others to hear. On Motzei Shabbos, I shared

with the boys that they are often in a position where they can thank others for something they did, and that it's healthy to make other people feel good about themselves – healthy and beneficial for everyone involved.

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Let's move on to the spouse who feels unappreciated.

Firstly, it's important to accept that some people genuinely find it difficult to express appreciation. Expecting someone to become much more appreciative when this doesn't come naturally to them is unrealistic. If it comes easily to you, be grateful for that and accept that your wife may never reach the same level as you. Don't compare the amount of appreciation you show to what she expresses. Your comfort levels are different, and it can take enormous effort for some people to simply say "thank you."

At the same time, don't be ashamed to ask for expressions of gratitude. You can be very straightforward and ask, "Did you appreciate when I did XYZ? I assume you did, but when you don't tell me, I'm sometimes left wondering..." It's also fine to tell someone, "Of course you don't have to, but it would still mean a lot to me if you said 'thank you.'" Don't attack, or ask why she didn't thank you. You're working from the assumption that she does appreciate what you do but just finds it hard to tell you.

If the response to your request for appreciation is, *"What, you need me to say it? Don't you know that I appreciate it?"* you can simply say, "Yes, it really does mean a lot to me when you say it." Tell her how it would make you feel when she thanks you – and when she does, even if it's not the warm, enthusiastic expression of appreciation you were hoping for, emphasize the good feeling she gave you with her thanks. "It was my pleasure to do that for you! I'm so glad to hear you enjoyed it."

I do want to mention one more thing, and that is the phenomenon of "over-givers." I don't mean to suggest that spouses should start giving less to one another. But if you give even when there's no appreciation or before a person even asks for something, you could end up promoting unhealthy behavior in that person and encouraging them to develop a feeling of entitlement. You don't have to jump to fulfill every whim, and you should beware of creating expectations you may not always be able to live up to. Instead, use *chochmah* to help your spouse learn to show appreciation, and heal your relationship together.

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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