

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

# Torah Lessons for the Home

## THE GIVING AND TAKING OF A COMPLIMENT

The Torah in this week's *parshah* describes Eisav as an "*ish yodeia tzayid, ish sadeh*—a man who understands hunting, a man of the field," and Yaakov Avinu as an "*ish tam yosheiv ohalim*—a pure-hearted man who sits in the tents." In his *sefer Chaim v'Shalom*, the Munkatcher Rav *ztz"l* asks why the Torah uses the word "*ish*" twice when describing Eisav, and only once when describing Yaakov.

He explains that Eisav had two faces, two opposing ways of presenting himself. One face was the one he displayed to Yitzchak Avinu when he asked how to take *maaser* from salt and straw; the other face was his evil face of murder that he displayed when out in the field. Yaakov, however, had just the one face; he was consistent in his *avodas Hashem*, serving Hashem wholeheartedly at all times without ulterior motives, and not seeking to impress anyone.

The Gemara relates a similar idea when relating what Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai told his *talmidim*: "*Yehi ratzon shetehei mora Shamayim k'mora basar ve'dam*—May it be Hashem's will that you fear Hashem as much as you fear your fellow humans." When his *talmidim* expressed surprise, Rabbi Yochanan said, "*halevai*—if only" people would be as concerned about what Hashem thinks of them as they are about what other people think...

Unfortunately, nothing has changed since and we can all think of examples of people, probably including ourselves, who act one way at home when "no one sees" and another way entirely when we want to make a good impression for "the world." It can be very disappointing for a husband or wife to see how their spouse knows very well how to say "thank you" and be *mevater* and generally behave properly at a social occasion, whereas at home, they don't make the effort to behave like a mensch.

Being an "*ish tam*," consistently *makpid* to have *middos tovos,* is one of the foundations of *shalom bayis.* When we speak of "*ish v'ishah... Shechinah sheruya beineihem*," we are referring to **within** the home. Out on the street, no one needs to know about a couple's deep connection. It's at home, when only Hashem sees, that the Shechinah needs to be invited in.

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Parshas
**Toldos**

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**Dear Rabbi Gruen,**

Thank you for your previous answer to a question I asked a while back; it helped me a lot. I have another question I would appreciate your advice on.

Recently, after my husband thanked me very nicely for supper, something that he doesn't do so much, I replied, "Thank you. It means a lot to me that you thank me for preparing the meal." Then my husband said that he doesn't like it when I thank him for his appreciation, because it puts him under a lot of pressure to always express appreciation.

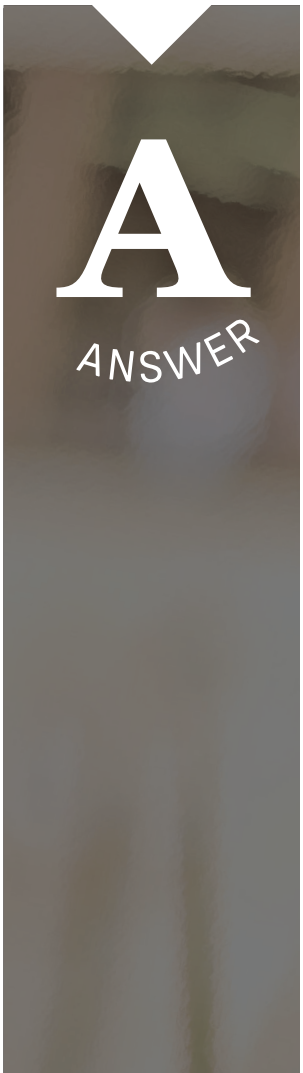
I said that I don't want him to feel under pressure, so he could take a break from saying "thank you" for the next two weeks.

Another thing: Whenever I thank him for doing something that I could see was hard for him and I tell him how important it was for me, I see that he feels really uncomfortable about me noticing what he did, so I asked him if he'd prefer that I don't thank him and he said he "doesn't know."

I explained that I like thanking him and expressing my gratitude for what he does, but he said that he doesn't know if it's a good idea.

How can I take the pressure off him? I actually enjoy thanking him, but I don't want to make him uncomfortable.

Thank you for all the advice that I gain so much from.




Before I address the question directly, I do want to thank the letter-writer for her compliments. Everyone likes a compliment, and I often point out my own appreciation to compliments I get, both because I mean it and because I want it to be understood that it's absolutely normal to enjoy a compliment and to appreciate appreciation. It's nothing to be ashamed of, and no one should worry about being or seeming "needy" or "silly" because they like to hear a "thank you." Most of us would do well to give many more compliments than we do, and we also need to know how to receive them graciously.

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It's a wonderful thing when a person genuinely enjoys expressing gratitude. Anyone can get used to thanking others, starting with small things and working up to bigger ones. Becoming a grateful person is one of the basics of Yiddishkeit and it's not as hard as many people think, because Hashem makes it pleasant to thank and appreciate others, once we become accustomed to it.

That said, no one should ever think that expressing gratitude and appreciation is optional. Even if you find it hard, this is something you have to do. It's just basic to being a mensch and knowing how to get on with other people; it's not a special *madreigah* reserved for people with exceptionally refined *middos*. The *Sefer Hachinuch* writes that the *mitzvah* of *kibbud av va'eim* is based on gratitude to our parents, which should bring us to gratitude to Hashem. It's an essential part of being a Yid.

As Harav Hutner *ztz"l* points out, the first step to being grateful is simply to notice what other people do for us, as is suggested by the word "*modeh*" (as in "*modim anachnu lach*"). Recognize, acknowledge, and appreciate—that's how to become a grateful person.

Sometimes, people think that verbalizing the "thank you" is just icing on the cake. "What, you actually need me to **say** it? Don't you know that I'm grateful?" That's like the (not very funny) joke about the couple, ten years married, who go to a *shalom bayis* counselor, and the wife complains that her husband never tells her that he loves her or appreciates her. The counselor turns to the husband. "Nu?"

"What do you mean, nu?" the husband retorts. "I told her when we got married that I love her and that if anything changes, I'll let her know."

Thanking Hashem for everything He sends us brings tremendous *brachah* into the world—and it's vital to verbalize it, even though obviously Hashem already knows exactly how we feel. *Kal v'chomer* when relating to other people, who can only guess what is in our hearts, it's necessary to verbalize our feelings and let them know how grateful we are.

If you want a person to know that you love them, respect them, treasure them—then tell them. Don't assume they "already know." The same is true with appreciation. If a person goes weeks, months, even years without hearing a good word, it's only natural for them to start to question their spouse's feelings.

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Now I'd like to address this specific question and start by pointing out that a husband who doesn't like getting a "thank you" is in many ways similar to someone who doesn't like receiving compliments of any kind. This is actually a relatively common issue.

There are several reasons why people don't enjoy receiving compliments or thanks, and sometimes don't accept them well. The first reason is skepticism. Someone gives you a compliment and you think, "Do they really mean it? Maybe they're only saying it because..." If you doubt a person's sincerity, it's not pleasant to hear what they are presenting as a compliment, when you hear it as manipulation. Another reason is related to the background relationship and the general style of communication. "Last week you told me that you're not happy about the way I did this, and now you're giving me a compliment? What's that all about?" People can become confused and unsure which of your expressions to believe and take seriously.

The third reason, the one that seems to apply here, relates to the person who doesn't want to feel obligated. "I did something nice for you when I wanted to. I don't want to feel like I have to keep doing it, just because you're making a whole big deal about it."

As I noted above, gratitude, showing appreciation, is an obligation, regardless of whether the other person makes a big deal out of it or not. You may not enjoy feeling obligated, but that doesn't change the fact that you **are** obligated.

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That said, there are ways to make it easier for both people, the one giving the compliment and the one receiving it.

There are many ways of giving a compliment, but most of them fall into two categories: direct and indirect.

A direct compliment could look like this: "Thank you so much for clearing the table last night. It makes such a difference when you do. I really appreciate it—it means a lot to me."

Turn it into an indirect compliment and it will look like this: "When I got home last night and saw everything put away and tidied up, I was so relieved. I was so tired and it was amazing to be able to just go to bed and not have to first deal with the kitchen. Thank you so much."

Both approaches include a "thank you" and that's important. But the direct compliment could, with some people, be interpreted as placing an obligation on them. When you make it about yourself—what you enjoyed, how you felt—you take the pressure off the other person.

Along similar lines, if someone thanks you for something you did, you can answer either directly or indirectly. "Thanks for the appreciation—it means a lot to me," can sound, to some people, like, "Keep giving me that appreciation because I need it and deserve it!" Some people are intimidated by such a response.

If instead you say, "Sure, no problem—I enjoyed doing that for you," there's no pressure implied.

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So far, we've been dealing with people who do express gratitude. What if they don't? What then? Do you call them out, saying: "Excuse me? You didn't thank me for that." That's unlikely to be productive. Giving them a lecture on how ungrateful they are, is also probably not going to help, and might just provoke a response such as: I don't need your favors, I can manage fine on my own.

But what's important to understand is: Are they really ungrateful? Or are they just not accustomed to noticing? What you can say instead is, "I'm sure you do appreciate that I did this for you, and this might just be my own issue. If you can tell me thank you when I do this, it'll mean a lot to me."

You can even add, "I don't mean to pressure you, and you don't have to say it, but I'd really like it if you could let me know you noticed this, once in a while at least."

If the response is, "What, you really need to hear a thank you?" then you can simply reply, "Yes, I would enjoy that a lot. Thanks for understanding." Don't be afraid to say it. It doesn't mean you're weak or needy. It's human to need appreciation. It's very hard to keep on giving with no acknowledgement. Being honest and courageous will *be'ezras Hashem* bring good results.

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I'd also like to mention a point that may apply to some people (though it doesn't seem to apply to this particular question at all. There are people on the other end of the spectrum who expect or even demand recognition and gratitude for every little thing. Even if they got fifty thank-yous that day, if their spouse or friend forgot to thank them for the fifty-first item on the list, they're not satisfied, and they often make it known: "You don't thank me for anything I do! Do you know how hard I worked to prepare the extra kugel??"

Whenever this scenario plays out, it's usually a sign that the real problem isn't lack of gratitude, but a lack of self-esteem in the person who feels unappreciated. Although noticing and thanking for everything a person receives is a wonderful thing, it's impossible to satisfy people who use other people's expressions of thanks to fill their lack of self-esteem. Even if the other person humbly backs down and apologizes, it is unlikely to resolve the situation.

Another issue to be aware of is second-guessing people unjustly. If someone thanks you for something, appreciate it. Don't start thinking (and certainly not saying), "You don't really mean it," unless you have good reason for feeling that way. Don't ask people to prove that they are being genuine (which is anyway impossible). You should be *dan lechaf zechus* and accept their words at face value.

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Recognizing and expressing gratitude is a very basic obligation. Everyone needs to be able to give and take compliments with a good feeling and to be consistent in treating other people with love and respect. *Be'ezras Hashem* when we do so, we will all bring the Shechinah into our homes.

**TORAH LESSONS FOR THE HOME**: TOLDOS 5784

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