RABBI
SHIMON GRUEN

Torah Lessons for the home

PARSHAS YISRO

THE MEANING OF MEANINGLESS GRATITUDE

When Hashem gave the Torah to Bnai Yisroel, He told Moshe Rabbeinu, *"Ko somar lebais Yaakov vesageid livnai Ysroel."* Rashi explains that Bais Yaakov refers to the women, who should be spoken to softly, and Bnai Yisroel refers to the men who would be given stricter instructions. The directive was to tell them, *"Vihiyisem li segulah mikol ha'amim* – you shall be for me a treasure among all the nations."

The Sfas Emes questions: Moshe Rabbeinu was given a message to relate to the people. Until now, he repeated all of Hashem's messages verbatim to the Am Yisroel. Why would he give different messages to the men and women regarding the fact that they are a more cherished and precious nation?

The Sfas Emes explains; Moshe gave the same message to the women as to the men. As preparation for Kabalas HaTorah, Moshe told them that they were becoming a special nation, the pride and joy of Hashem. The difference was in their *perception* of the message. The women heard "special", "privileged", "close to Hashem". The men heard "duty", "obligation", and the "responsibility of being close to Hashem".

This reinforces a well known idea, that the same message can be taken differently by different people. People often say that 'I didn't mean anything,' or 'I talk this way to everyone,' and don't understand why others are upset at them.

I once heard a *melamed* say that he said something to a boy, and the boy was very insulted. "I don't know what his problem is. I talk this way to everyone." The fact that you talk to everyone the same way is part of the problem. When you talk to *everyone*, you can safely assume that some people will take it differently than others.

People often complain that their spouse misinterpreted their intentions. Even if everyone else in your life would have understood what you really meant to say, it's time to figure out what your spouse is taking wrong and adjust your words accordingly. In communication, it's not only about what you said or what you meant, but about how you get your message across to the other person. And this is all the more important when communicating with a spouse or child.

Question:

Dear Rabbi Gruen,

My son's bar mitzvah is coming up. I personally don't believe in the "thank you" at the end of the bar mitzva *pshetel*. I feel it's forced and not authentic. My son asked if I would write it up for him. I told him to tell me what he wants to say and I would add it, but he said that he's embarrassed to say it. I told him he doesn't have to say it but he said that if I would write it, it would be easier for him. I asked why and he said that if I'd write it, he would just be reading off a paper. I said that's just the point, that's why it's not meaningful. A thank you that's just read off a paper, that he doesn't really mean, doesn't mean much to me either. I told him that it's more important to add the thank yous here and there when Mommy makes supper and other such opportunities instead of just leaving it for the end of the speech. What's your opinion on this?

Thank you.

Answer:

Most bar mitzvah speeches end off with a thank you to the parents and grandparents. For my son's bar mitzvah, I added such a paragraph to his speech too. In fact, by my own bar mitzvah and by my son's bar mitzvah, although we didn't get to say the entire pshetel because of the "minhag" that the guests disrupt the speech with song, still, we made sure to wait for the quiet and say this last piece, thanking our parents for everything. But if it's not "real", why is it important?

In many areas of chinuch, the goal is the training to do things right. If we would wait for children to be ready to daven or learn, help, or say please and thank you, and demand that they mean it sincerely, they wouldn't get very far. It's possible that they would never mean it. On the other hand, if a child would mean it, they wouldn't need to be taught; they would do the right thing on their own. Chinuch is training children in what's right and proper even before a child understands the whys and hows. It's about developing healthy routines.

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Even on a personal level, there are areas in Avodas Hashem that require such an approach. The Seforim teach that *"Hergel naaseh teva* – routine creates (a second) nature." Doing something – albeit insincerely – will lead a person to do it naturally. A person may not be able to daven with complete *kavanah*. But if

he "puts up a show" of a sincere *tefillah*, and what he's trying to achieve is right and proper, he can and should continue this insincere act to achieve that goal.

The Sefer Hachinuch teaches that "*Haadam nifal lefi peulosav*." Acting a certain way affects a person. This is true both for positive and negative actions. If a person does something wrong, even if he doesn't mean it, it has an effect on him. But imagine the power of this for the positive. Acting 'as if', saying something nice, doing something right, will also have an effect.

When a *bachur* reads an insincere 'thank you' at the end of his speech, he's expressing appreciation. That's a good thing. It's also the right thing to do. Even if he doesn't really mean it and he's not up to that level, it's still training him to do what's right and may get him to real appreciation faster.

Moreover, don't get turned off by his embarrassment. Many people, even older than a 13-year-old bar mitzvah boy, have a hard time being vulnerable in a relationship. Compound this with the fact that he has to do this in front of so many people, and you can understand why it should be hard for him to express his feelings, even if he means it. It doesn't mean that he's unappreciative. And so, it might be easier to just read it off a paper.

Look, the entire *pshetel* is somewhat of a farce. He doesn't necessarily understand the *kushya,* the *teirutz,* the buildup, the flow. Yet, we wouldn't cut it out. It's quite the same with the thank you at the end.

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Of course, there's more than the end of a *pshetel* with it comes to teaching a child to be appreciative. It's important to express gratitude at a milestone moment, but we should teach our children to express appreciation more often. The 'thank you' after supper or after a trip is likely also fake. When a child thanks a parent after being reminded and cajoled into thanking, it's not any less fake than the bar mitzvah speech. But it's the same training. With time, hopefully, the child will learn to be thankful.

You can teach your children to say 'thank you' once a week for something special at the Shabbos table. He doesn't mean it but it's still meaningful. It's still training.

And we don't want to train our children to say thank you only when they mean it. That's not good chinuch. The Chovos Halevavos explains that part of the reason for the creation of *sheker* is so that we can use it to make others feel good even when we don't mean it sincerely. Chinuch is to say it even when you don't fully mean it, because it's good to express appreciation. And a bar mitzvah is a great opportunity to thank parents for everything they do for you.

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We also have to be careful with being too real. People are sometimes afraid of giving a compliment that they don't mean 100%. Then there are people who are given a compliment, yet they don't accept it because they feel it wasn't given with complete sincerity. Trying to make someone feel good is very healthy. So do it; even if you don't mean it. And accept it when it's done to you.

There's a *vertel* from Reb Hershel Ostropoler about a man who invited his friends to a party. For the main course, he served water. He explained that he went to the butcher to buy meat for the party and the butcher told him the meat was so soft, it was like animal fat. He figured, why serve something *like* animal fat? He'd serve animal fat itself. So he went to get fat, and he was told it was smooth as oil. So he figured he'd serve oil instead of something that was like

oil. When he went to buy oil, they said it was as clean as vodka. And when he went to get vodka, they told him it was as pure as water, which is how he landed up serving water as the main course.

It was 100% pure.

And that's what 100% truth can sometimes look like. When you hanker for the ultimate, real compliment, you may end up with nothing at all. As a father, you can teach your son that you'll take a thank you and accept a behavior even before it's 100% genuine.

I once worked with a man who had a difficult relationship with his father. After a while, he wanted to start over on good terms and decided to buy a beautiful *becher* for his father for yom tov. It didn't help. Later, they went for a meeting to try to work things out and the father went on a long rant about all the things his son did wrong, "and the biggest *chutzpah* of all, you bought me a *becher*!"

So maybe the gift wasn't given with perfectly warm feelings. But in demanding complete truth, the father lost out on the opportunity to rebuild the relationship. I often see people rejecting an expression of appreciation, gratitude, affection and the likes with the excuse that the person saying it doesn't mean it - it's such a shame to shut someone down and probably cause even less of such expression in the future because it wasn't 100% genuine. Maybe it wasn't, but it's possible it wasn't 100% ingenuine either. Promote the good, compliment it, and maybe it'll get better as time goes on.

Imagine if after your son says his *pshetel*, with a nice 'thank you' for his parents, your wife goes over to your son and thanks him for the thanks. Maybe she doesn't either *really* mean it all the way because she knows he didn't prepare it himself. Still, she's teaching him what's meaningful and proper. That's healthy *chinuch*. After that, you may be able to teach him to express gratitude more often. Perhaps with time he'll learn to mean it more.

If we can get others to do the right thing, and if we can appreciate when others do the right thing, *even when they don't fully mean it,* it shows what's meaningful to us and will help encourage a healthy attitude, build good behavior and promote meaningful relationships.

Wishing you much nachas from your bar mitzvah boy and the entire family,

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

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