

HAKARAT HATOV - APPRECIATING THE GOOD IN OUR LIVES by Rabbi Aviva Goldberg
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Good evening and shana tova.

According to our tradition the month that has just past, the month of Elul is one of preparation for the High Holy days. The shofar is blown once a day in the synagogue, slichot or penitential prayers are recited and we are enjoined to consider our behaviours of the past year, asking for forgiveness from those to whom we have transgressed and more. It is a time of reconciliation, reflection and resolution in all its meanings.

In fact the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are called Yamim Noraim the days of awe, days of repentance, of serious introspection to and I quote “consider our sins and repent before the end of Yom Kippur day.” These are the days in which the themes of what is called in Hebrew teshuva tefillah and tzedakah, repentance, prayer and charity are paramount.

In thinking about these High Holy Days, however, it seems to me that one more theme should be added even though it is hardly as alliterative as the ones I just delineated. That is the theme of *hakarat hatov* – gratitude – literally recognizing the good that is all around us and that we too rarely acknowledge.

It is I think a part of human nature to say ‘if only’ if only my life was this way or that, to feel sorry for ourselves, no matter how little or how much we have. Basically to *kvetch* – which if you look up in the dictionary means to complain constantly, to not appreciate, to not have *hakarat hatov* – recognition of our good fortune.

Though perhaps it is an urban myth, an apocryphal tale, there is a story I would like to share with you from the writing of Alan Morinis the founder and Dean of The Mussar Institute, an institute of Jewish ethics and learning.

One evening, so the story goes, the great violinist Itzhak Perlman was in New York to give a concert. As many of you know, Perlman had polio when he was a child and wears braces on both legs and walks with two crutches. He laboured across the stage and slowly reached the chair in which he sat in order to play. He sat down and signalling to the conductor he raised his violin and began to play. No sooner had he finished the first few bars of his piece, than one of the strings on his violin snapped, loudly enough that in the silence of the rapt audience it could be heard like the report of a gunshot. The assemblage gasped.

Perlman was close enough to the beginning of the piece that it would have been reasonable to have brought the concert to a halt while he replaced the string, to begin again. But that's not what he did.

He waited a moment and then signaled the conductor to pick up just where they had left off. He now had only three strings with which to play his soloist part. He was able to find some of the missing notes on adjoining strings, but where that wasn't possible, he rearranged the music on the spot in his head so that it all still held together. Pearlman played with passion and artistry, spontaneously rearranging the symphony right through to the end. When he finally rested his bow, the audience sat for a moment in stunned silence. And then they rose to their feet and cheered wildly.

Perlman raised his bow to signal for quiet. "You know," he said, "it is the artist's task to make beautiful music with what he has left."

Was he speaking only about his violin strings or was he also referring to his body? And is what he said only true to artists such as himself? And can we, like Perlman make something of beauty out of what we have, incomplete as it may be?

As Morinis notes: If you have lost your job, but you still have family and friends and health you have something to be grateful for. If you can only move around

with a wheelchair but your mind is sharp you have something to be grateful for. If you've broken the strings on your violin and you still have three more, you have something to be grateful for.

This is gratitude - to recognize and appreciate what we have for what it is.

Do we, however, instead focus on the deficiencies in our lives and barely perceive the good? Do we constantly look for, cry for what we don't have and not appreciate what we do have?

“To not have felt pain is not to have been human.” wrote our sages. It is how we deal with this pain, how we deal with the human condition, that is most important.

Do we live rejoicing in our own portion in life to use the phrase of the rabbis? Do we recognize, as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, that to have more is not to **be** more.

In Judaism, we do not take vows of poverty or celibacy – rather we are taught to enjoy, to embrace the material world, but to do so in wisdom and most importantly in gratitude.

I have known in my life many people who have faced adversity in incredible ways, by their inner courage, by their core intellect, by their sense of humour – yes there are times when I am sure they feel overwhelmed by their problems, yes there are moments when they feel that they just can't keep going on and yes there are times that they do *kvetch* – for they are human beings not saints.

What do they all have in common?

I would say it is that very core of our tradition's ethical *musar* teachings *hakarat hatov*, gratitude for the things most of us take for granted: gratitude for acts of kindness, for a shared meal, for the sounds and sights of nature, for the smile of a friend, and a stranger. Gratitude which as the Brestliver rebbe said, "is always ready to light a candle and have a party."

I'd like to end this little talk by relating another tale from our tradition which I have adapted for this evening. The Chofetz Chayyim, a great early 20th century sage who lived in Radun Poland was visited by an American financier. Coming from luxury, the American was astounded by how sparsely furnished the Chofetz Chayyim's home was. Unable to contain himself, he asked, "Where is your furniture?" The Chofetz Chayyim replied, "Where is yours?" The man, a bit surprised, said, "Oh, I am only passing through." The Chofetz Chayyim replied, "I, too, am only passing through."

As we embark on the beginning of a New Year, let us demonstrate gratitude: gratitude for the important things in our lives – friends, family, love, and health. – and let us be liberated by expressing this gratitude and in so doing bring joy to ourselves and to others. Shana tova.