



The Pardes
Hakarat HaTov
Study Companion

הכרת הטוב

Teachings and Reflections on Expressing Gratitude

In honor of Mem D. Bernstein

Chairman of The AVI CHAI Foundation

A visionary in Jewish education

Upon the occasion of her receiving an honorary doctorate

from The Hebrew University in June 2019



The Blessing of Good News

Rabbi Leon A. Morris

| Rabbi Leon A. Morris is the President of Pardes.

Good news is always a blessing. Even so, the notion of reciting a specific blessing with formulaic words that acknowledge the good we have experienced in our lives may be unfamiliar to many, and certainly underutilized by most. **Mishna Berakhot 9:2** states:

עַל הַגְּשָׁמִים וְעַל הַבְּשׂוּרוֹת הַטּוֹבוֹת אוֹמֵר בְּרוּךְ הַטּוֹב וְהַמְטִיב, וְעַל שְׂמוּעוֹת רָעוֹת אוֹמֵר בְּרוּךְ דֵּין הָאֱמֶת.

For rain and for good news one says, “Blessed is the One who is good and grants good.” For bad news one says, “Blessed is the true judge.”

Later in the Talmud (Taanit 31), we learn that this blessing acknowledging good was established on the 15th of Av, when the Romans finally allowed the Jews to bury those who had been killed in the final battle of the rebellion against the Romans in the year 135 CE in Beitar. The Roman emperor Hadrian forbade the burial of the bodies of those who died. His successor ultimately allowed the dead to be buried several years later. It is at that moment, the Talmud suggests, that the Rabbis coined this blessing, “Blessed is the One who is good and grants good.”

רב מתנה ביום שנתנו הרוגי ביתר לקבורה ואמר רב מתנה אותו יום שנתנו הרוגי ביתר לקבורה תקנו ביבנה הטוב והמטיב שלא הסריחו והמטיב שנתנו לקבורה.

Rav Mattana said: There was an additional salvation on this day, as it was the day that the slain of Beitar were brought to burial, several years after the battle at Beitar (see Gittin 57a). And Rav Mattana said: On the same day that the slain of Beitar were brought to burial, they instituted the blessing: Who is good and grants good, at Yavne. Who is good, thanking God that the corpses did not decompose while awaiting burial, and grants good, thanking God that they were ultimately brought to burial.

What a strange provenance for this blessing, particularly in light of the fact that the Mishnah contrasts this blessing, ברוך הטוב והמטיב – Blessed is the One who is good and grants good – with the blessing said upon hearing of a death, ברוך דין האמת – Blessed is the true judge. The blessing of ברוך הטוב והמטיב acknowledges goodness experienced in this life. It is an affirmation of God and goodness in the world. The blessing of ברוך דין האמת reminds us that God is the ultimate arbiter of justice, who determines the number of our days. It expresses resignation in the face of that reality. There is little we know or understand, and therefore we put our faith in God. At first glance, this unusual Talmudic passage which connects the blessing of God’s goodness with the permission to bury those who died fighting for Jewish sovereignty seems to confuse these two distinct realms of blessing: the fullness of life and the shadow of death. However, perhaps Tractate Taanit is teaching us that God’s goodness can be observed and experienced absolutely everywhere, in moments of delight and celebration, as well as in moments of loss and catastrophe. To affirm goodness is to seek it out. ברוך הטוב והמטיב is more than a blessing to recite. It is a religious posture, encouraging us to look for goodness, even in unexpected places, and to experience God as its ultimate source.



A Jewish “Take” on Gratitude

Yossi Prager

Yossi Prager is the Executive Director for North America of The AVI CHAI Foundation.

Is there a distinctively Jewish perspective on gratitude? I believe that there is: gratitude in Jewish thinking carries with it a sometimes uncomfortable acceptance of our dependence on others, most significantly on God.

This idea is developed in an essay by Rabbi Yitzhak Hutner, the great 20th century Torah scholar and founder of Yeshivat Rabbi Chaim Berlin in New York (Pahad Yitzhak, Essays on Hanukah, pages 32-33). Rav Hutner uses a linguistic analysis of the Hebrew root *hoda'ah*, which is the source of the word *todah* (thank you), to present a profound psychological and spiritual insight.

Hoda'ah in Hebrew means two very different things: 1) gratitude and 2) legal admission or concession (as in “I admit that I owe the money you claim”). At first glance, it seems surprising that the same word carries two such seemingly unrelated meanings. How is gratitude tied to admission/concession? The question intensifies when we contrast the Hebrew with the two meanings of the word “appreciate” in English: 1) I am grateful and 2) I understand (as in “I appreciate the distinction between this and that”). In English, the two meanings are intuitively connected – I can only be grateful (appreciative) if I first understand (appreciate) the gift I have received. Is the Hebrew parallel: What do I admit when I say thank you?

Rav Hutner explains – in a national, Hanukah-related context – that people generally aspire to feel independent and self-sufficient. A person who needs some kind of significant help may experience the need as personal weakness and dependence that undermines their sense of self-worth. In that case, they might resent the gift even as they need to take it. They may also be uncomfortable with the feeling of indebtedness that arises from receiving the gift. The gratitude that follows is then half-hearted.

Saying thank you from a Jewish perspective involves an admission – an acceptance and ideally an embrace of the reality – that we are, in fact, dependent on other people; we are part of a community that cares for, and relies on the caring of, others. This should not embarrass or weaken us, for no person is actually self-sufficient. In the cosmic scheme, each of us is personally insignificant and impotent, reliant on daily gifts of an Omnipotent God for our good health and sustenance. Traditionally, the first thing Jews do every morning is recite *Modeh Ani*, thanking God for the gift of waking up in the morning and, simultaneously, admitting our dependence on Him. Jewish self-worth arises not from self-sufficiency, but from an effort to be part of a community built on the Divine model of generosity and caring. At various points in our lives and relationships, we will each be givers and takers and should be able to embrace each role wholeheartedly.

For some, admitting dependence on family and friends may be more emotionally difficult than admitting dependence on an intangible and unquestionably powerful God. The spiritual power of the Jewish concept of gratitude is that embracing our dependence on God can make it easier to become comfortable with our dependence on the kindness of friends, family and even strangers. Making peace with our dependence will lead to more full-throated Jewish gratitude – and perhaps inspire a more positive approach to our lives generally.

אני מודים לך על כל הטוב
שאתה עושה לי



“*Modeh Ani....*”

David Bernstein

| Dr. David I. Bernstein is the Dean of Pardes.

Jewish tradition teaches us that these are the very first words one should utter each morning upon awakening. We express thanks that we are alive, that we can breathe.

The *mitzvah* of *hakarat hatov* — acknowledging the good, whether coming from God or from the people around us — is a powerful tool that not only inculcates gratefulness. It is an expression of one’s own limitations, a recognition that I am not completely in control, that I owe to others. There is a direct line between that expression and humility. This is a guard against excessive arrogance.

Sarah Schenirer, the brave pioneer of Torah education for Haredi women in Poland in the early 20th century, warned her many thousands of students in her ethical will that such excessive pride will prevent a person from serving God. (She also warned against excessive humility.)

We can take her warning one step further. Arrogance is a threat to living an ethical life.

For what is more unethical than not to appreciate what others do for you? The self-centered person will almost always be less giving, less kind, to others. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks points out that the “*Modim*” blessing in the daily *Amidah*, recited in every prayer service, 365 days a year, is the only one in which we bow twice — once at the beginning and once at the end. *Hakarat hatov*, acknowledging the good, is *that* important a mitzvah.

As such, inculcating gratefulness as a character trait may be nothing less than the first step towards building an ethical personality.

“ The Pardes Day School Educators Program (PEP) has first and foremost propelled me on my own Jewish journey and aided me in finding more meaning in my life through the vehicle of Jewish texts. Each PEP student cultivates the skills needed in order to become the best Jewish educator possible, and to share our passion for Torah with students in a way that would have been close to impossible without our growth at Pardes. ”

Barry Rosekind,

currently graduating from the Pardes
Day School Educators Program.





The Fruit of Appreciation

Evan Wolkenstein

Evan Wolkenstein is Director of Experiential Education and a Jewish Studies teacher at the Jewish Community High School of the Bay and a graduate of the Pardes Day School Educators Program.

Almost 20 years ago, I came to Pardes with a kind of hunger. I'd already dabbled in Torah learning but had discovered only an aching tension: I was drawn to the heritage of my family and my people, but I'd found the easy answers I'd been handed deeply dissatisfying. I'd learned about the story of Creation, for example, the Garden of Eden, and I found the notion of Sin and Punishment uninspiring. Insufficient. Simplistic. I felt that this story must offer more to us than a lesson about temptation, the war between humanity's good and bad impulses.

Then, my philosophy of Judaism class, taught by Rabbi Yosef Liebowitz, turned things upside down. The Garden of Eden, he suggested, was not about humanity's first descent into sin. It was about the journey of humanity to return to a primordial state of Oneness, a state of *Tov*. And rather than this journey being the "undoing" of a tragic mistake, the actions of the first Human Beings set in motion an eternal story of *reunity* -- that being a deeper Oneness than a Oneness that never knew a split.

My mind reeled: life was a journey of discovering what is already within? I was 25 then, beginning a long chapter of exploration, of traveling country to country and continent to continent, and I had no idea that 20 years later, I would teach this idea to my own students at JCHS of the Bay.

The term *hakarat hatov* generally means to give recognition to those who bring good things to the world, good things to our lives, but with Rabbi Liebowitz's definition in place, it means also to recognize something familiar in the world in a strange new format, and to know that it is already part of us. In that sense, I'd walked away from other models of Judaism and had found Pardes because I knew *Tov* when I heard it. It was always there, within me, waiting to recognize itself in a fresh, new form.

Over four years, many teachers opened my eyes, or I might say, I opened my eyes to them. I saw that they were a few steps ahead of me on a journey. With their teaching and my inner compass, I found my way from year to year, from Jerusalem to Boston to Atlanta to San Francisco. I found my calling, met my wife, became a father and discovered that I was, at heart, a lifelong career educator. And in no small part this was because I encountered shocking, familiar wisdom from a class at Pardes. And all because I knew Truth when I heard it.

There is a paradox, then: of giving thanks where thanks are due, on the one hand...and recognizing that one's ability to know what and whom and how to thank comes from within. In that sense, the act of *hakarat hatov* closes a circle, as wisdom reaches out to wisdom, recognizing it in the face of Others, and sounding deeply and personally true, all at once.



Hakarat Hatov: Familiar Feeling or Strange Sentiment?

Rachel Friedrichs

Rachel Friedrichs is the Assistant Director of the Pardes Center for Jewish Educators and is a graduate of the Pardes Day School Educators Program.

Among the many things that one learns, spending two years in the Pardes *beit midrash*, is to bring a keen and critical eye to the texts we read. The countless hours of engaging with a *havruta* dissecting and analyzing the words of our tradition train one's mind to instinctively formulate questions and generate plausible answers.

So, when taking a few minutes to reflect upon the fundamental *middah* (value) of *hakarat hatov*, those same skills were immediately brought to bear. Numerous questions sprung to mind, but the one that stuck emerged from the interesting fact that the word *hakara* — generally translated as to know, recognize or be familiar with — comes from the root נ.כ.ר, which is a contronym (a word that is its own antonym); notably, this same Hebrew root also means to be strange, foreign or unknown¹. And so, this begs the question: Why would the term for gratitude or appreciation in Hebrew be built on a word that could negate its own meaning? Are we meant to recognize the good in our lives or be estranged from it?

The duality of this root is surprising in our context of gratitude, but I want to claim that instead of thinking of the two meanings as opposite ends of a spectrum, it might be helpful to think of them rather as two sides of the same coin. Let's look at a line from the Torah to illustrate this point. In verb form, the root נ.כ.ר appears only a handful of times in the entire *humash*, and yet strikingly it is used four times in two consecutive verses in *Parshat Miketz* (Genesis 42:7-8). The context here is that famine forces Joseph's brothers down to Egypt, where they hope to buy food from Pharaoh's second-in-command in charge of the granaries... who is actually their brother Joseph whom they had sold into slavery many years prior!

וַיִּרְא יוֹסֵף אֶת-אֶחָיו וַיִּכְרֵם; וַיִּתְנַכֵּר אֲלֵיהֶם וַיְדַבֵּר אֲתָם קָשׁוֹת, וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם מִיִּן בָּאתֶם, וַיֹּאמְרוּ מֵאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן לְשֹׁבֵר-אֶכְלָל. (ח) וַיִּכַּר יוֹסֵף אֶת-אֶחָיו; וְהֵם לֹא הִכְרָהוּ.

When Joseph saw his brothers, he **recognized** them (ויכרם); but he **made himself a stranger** (ויתנכר) in front of them and spoke harshly to them. He asked them, "Where do you come from?" And they said, "From the land of Canaan, to procure food." Though Joseph **recognized** (ויכר) his brothers, they did not **recognize** him (הכרהו).

Notice how the verb is used back to back in the first verse, with both of its opposing meanings. When one side sees — in this case Joseph — the other side, his brothers, does not. Joseph, in an attempt to shrewdly play his cards and elicit whether his brothers feel remorse for their ghastly behavior towards him, inverts his recognition of his brothers in order to conceal himself from them.



The Essence of a Jew

Reuven Margrett

Rabbi Reuven Margrett is the Director of Digital Content of the Pardes Center for Jewish Educators and a graduate of the Pardes Day School Educators Program.

When thinking about *hakarat hatov* (recognizing the good), it is worth remembering that the Jewish people are literally rooted in this concept. We are called Jews or *Yehudim*, after the tribe of Yehuda, whose Hebrew linguistic root is *yadah*/יָדָה - which means to give thanks. This means that it is literally in the DNA of all Jews (*Yehudim*) to recognize the good that someone does for them and give thanks for it.

It is surprising to note that the Babylonian Talmud (Berachot 7b) says that the naming of Yehuda by his mother Leah was the first ever act of thanks in the Torah:

And Rabbi Yohanan said in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai: From the day the Holy One, Blessed be He, created the world, no one thanked the Holy One, Blessed be He, until Leah came and thanked Him, as it is stated: [“And she became pregnant and gave birth to a son, and she said,] ‘This time I will give thanks to God,’ [and thus he was called Yehuda”] (Genesis 29:35).

While previous people recognized and blessed God, Leah was the first to thank God for the outpouring of bounty she received. The commentators note that she prophesied that there would be 12 sons from Jacob’s four wives (averaging three each); therefore, when she gave birth to Jacob’s fourth son, she felt that she had received more than her allotted portion. To commemorate this she named that child Yehuda, saying: **‘This time I will give thanks to God.’**

Up until Leah, people may have felt the goodness God gave them, but the recognition was not that they received ‘above and beyond’ what was coming to them. For example: a person may be involved in doing charitable deeds and when things go well for them they feel the goodness is justified, as it is a fair outcome for all their hard work and effort. However, Leah is teaching us something else.

There are times in our lives when God gives us a reward above and beyond that which is our fair share. The same holds true on a national level, as well (remember that King David, all future kings, and the Messianic vision are all tied to the tribe of Yehuda). There are times, perhaps most of the time, when the Jewish nation does not live up to our true potential, yet God is generous and patient with us, even though we have not earned it. The Jewish people should be in a continual state of thankfulness for the goodness we continue to receive on a daily basis. To be anything less than thankful for this “above and beyond” generosity on God’s part is to deny the essence of our Jewishness.



Blessings of Thanksgiving

Amanda Pogany

Amanda Pogany is the Head of School of Luria Academy, Brooklyn, and a graduate of the Pardes Day School Educators Program.

As a parent of three small children, and a Head of School of 300 children, I often find myself giving reminders to show gratitude. As we move through our days, it's easy to forget to say thank you, it's easy to forget to pause and appreciate what we have, and it's easy to forget to thank the people around us for their contribution to our lives. Luckily, our tradition not only encourages moments of gratitude, but it builds them into our daily rituals. In our liturgy, we have opportunities during our *Amidah* to pause and reflect on the good things in our life. The Rambam (Mishneh Torah Blessings 1:4) describes three categories of blessings: in addition to what we would commonly expect - blessings for material things and blessings for fulfilling religious obligations - the Rabbis also teach us to recite blessings of thanksgiving, reminding us not only to reflect on what is good in our lives, but also to be grateful to our Creator who is at the center of all that we have.

Hakarat hatov, recognizing the good, is a practice that benefits all of us. Being grateful and showing gratitude is humbling, inspiring, and makes those around us feel appreciated and loved. In our moments of despair, when we are feeling bad about how things are unfolding in our lives, recognizing the good challenges us to seek out the positive and to notice and appreciate our relationships, opportunities, and the blessings God has given us.

Saying thank you is nice, but it is often routine, and many times goes unnoticed. But *hakarat hatov* - authentic, thoughtful, reflective gratitude - can be transformational for the giver as well as the receiver.

When you are immersed in an experience, it is not always possible to recognize the impact that experience is having on your life. When I was a student in the Pardes Day School Educators Program, at the age of 22, I could not have anticipated the transformational impact the program would have on me and the work I would do. In the moment, I was grateful for the opportunity to spend my days immersed in Torah. I was grateful for the pedagogy training and the push to be a reflective practitioner, preparing me to work with classrooms full of Jewish day school students. And I was grateful to be able to live and study in Jerusalem with a cohort of thoughtful and creative future Jewish educators.

At the time, my feelings of gratitude towards The AVI CHAI Foundation for their support and towards the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies were profound. It was a gift to feel as though I had found my path, the opportunity to teach Torah to so many children, to give them skills and tools to access our tradition. And I was truly grateful.

And now, 17 years after I began the Pardes Day School Educators Program, I have the opportunity for *hakarat hatov* again. And although my gratitude is for the same experience, for those same foundational skills that I acquired back then, it is with a clarity and sense of purpose that I never

אני מודים לפרדס

imagined possible. Today, I am grateful to Mem Bernstein and The AVI CHAI Foundation for investing in me. I am grateful for the opportunity to lead a community; every day I have the opportunity to impact the lives of students and teachers, parents and friends. I am grateful to be pushing the field of Jewish education to be more progressive, student-centered and inclusive. I am grateful to be continually growing and evolving as a leader and as a model for my staff and my community. And I am grateful to be engaged in raising the future leaders of the Jewish people. The best thing about *hakarat hatov* is that you can be grateful in the moment and then you can be grateful all over again.



“ The Pardes Day School Educators Program has at the same time given me a sense of burning purpose and tremendous humility. The importance of the purpose makes me feel eternally thirsty to be more knowledgeable and that thirst ever reignites my sense of purpose. With gratitude. ”

Nati Kanovsky,
currently graduating from the Pardes
Day School Educators Program.



“ More and more, I feel the Pardes Day School Educators Program does something that is bravely revolutionary in today's educational climate: to focus on the Jewish textual tradition itself, independent of any one particular ideological bent. To learn day in and day out in the Beit Midrash, surrounded by inspired teachers and motivated peers, prepares us to be Jewish educators who are capable of passing on a nuanced, vibrant, living Judaism to our future students, one that will help them lead lives worth living. I am grateful to be able to learn to be an educator at Pardes through the support of The AVI CHAI Foundation. ”

Jonah Potasznik,
currently graduating from the Pardes
Day School Educators Program.