

Good Shabbos, everyone.

Mazal Tov to Shlomo and Adina Hollander on the *Bar Mitzva* of their son Yehuda. Mazal Tov to his grandparents, Ron and Myrna Mitnick and Eli Meir and Ruthie Hollander.

Thank you to the *drasha* sponsors:

- Chaim and Sherry Berlin, in memory of Rose Berlin, Baila Rochel bas Chaim Shalom, on her 8th *yahrtzeit*, and in memory of Alvin Berlin, Avrohom ben Yisrael Yitzchak, on his 35th *yahrtzeit*. May their *neshamos* have an *aliya*.
- Howard and Shirley Blumenfeld, in memory of Shirley's father, Yitzchak Goldman, Yitzchak ben Shmuel, whose *yahrtzeit* is the 24<sup>th</sup> of Tammuz. May his *neshama* have an *aliya*.

May the sponsors be rewarded for their support of the shul with *bracha*, *hatzlacha*, and good health.

Today is the fourth of July, the 250th birthday of the United States of America, a day to express *hakaras hatov* for this wonderful country.

*Hakaras hatov* is the recognition of the good that others have done for you. The willingness to name it, to honor it, to let it shape who you are. *Hakaras hatov* is not merely a pleasant *middah*, a nice quality to cultivate, alongside patience and generosity. It is something closer to the foundation of a moral life. Without it, nothing else works, and with it, almost everything becomes possible. And *hakaras hatov* does not mean appreciating only when everything is going smoothly; when all is perfect. It means recognizing הטוב the good, whenever, and wherever it exists.

Let us begin with a keen insight of **Chazal** in *Parashas Balak*. The Torah introduces Balak with characteristic brevity: *במדבר כב:ב) וַיִּרְא בָּלַק בֶּן צְפוּר אֶת כָּל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה יִשְׂרָאֵל לְאַמְרֵי Balak, son of Tzippor, saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites.* He saw their power, and he was afraid. He mobilized and hired the greatest prophet of the age to destroy the Jewish people with words.

What the Torah does not say explicitly, but what *Chazal* do say, is what Balak should have remembered. The Moabites had no business being hostile to the Jewish people. They owed their very existence as a nation to Avraham Avinu. When Sodom was destroyed, Lot was saved only because of Avraham's pleading. Lot's descendants, the nation of Moav, the kingdom of Balak himself, owed their national existence to the grandfather of the very people they now sought to destroy.

*Chazal* see this as the sin of Balak. The specific moral blindness that allows a person to look at the source of his blessing and see only a threat. To receive everything and acknowledge nothing. To live inside a gift and never once notice the giver.

**Rav Yitzchak Hutner** points out that the deeper meaning of *hakaras hatov* is built into the Hebrew language. The word *todah* shares its root with *hoda'ah* — admitting and acknowledging. In his words: *פָּחַד יִצְחָק, חֲנוּכָה, מֵאִמֵּר ב, אֹת ה) אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה יִשְׂרָאֵל לְאַמְרֵי הַנְּפִלְשִׁי הַנְּעִמְלֵק אֶשֶׁל כָּל הַבְּעֵת תּוֹדָה הוּא מֵעֲשֵׂה הַזְּכָרָה*  
*The deep psychological root of every expression of gratitude is an act of acknowledgment.*

To say “thank you” in Hebrew is to say: “I recognize that something came from outside myself, that I stand in a web of obligation I did not weave alone.” Balak could not say that. There was simply no room in his worldview for gratitude.

But Balak is not the first ingrate in the Torah. That distinction, painfully, belongs to Adam. When God asks — did you eat from the tree? — Adam does not say “yes.” He does not say “no.” He says: *בראשית ג:יב) הָאִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי עִמָּדִי הִיא נָתַתָּה לִּי מִן הָעֵץ וְאָכַלְתִּי*  
*The woman that You gave to be with me — she gave it to me and I ate.*

The **Medrash** states: (בראשית רבה יט:יב) כאן קָפַר בְּטוֹבָהּ. Here he denied the good. Adam could not bring himself to be grateful for the remarkable, unprecedented gift of a companion, of love, of not being alone in the universe — and so the gift curdled into a grievance. *The woman that You gave to be with me.* As if Chava were a burden he had been assigned, rather than a blessing he had been granted.

This is the first appearance in human history of what may be the most destructive character flaw of all; not cruelty, not dishonesty, but כפיית טוב — ingratitude — the inability to see what you have been given. The inability to look at your life and say: this came from somewhere. Someone did this for me. I owe something in return.

This is precisely why the very first words a Jew speaks every morning are not a petition, not a declaration of faith, not an inventory of what the day requires. They are an act of acknowledgment and thanks:

”מוֹדֵה אֲנִי לְפָנֶיךָ מֶלֶךְ חַי וְקַיִם שֶׁהַחַיּוּת בִּי נִשְׁמַתִּי בְּחַמְלָה, רַבָּה אֶמְנוּנְךָ

*I recognize and give thanks before You, living and eternal King, for You have returned my soul to me with great compassion. Your faithfulness is abundant.*

The **Mishnah Berurah** rules at the very beginning of his commentary (משנה ברורה א:א):

קִדְּם שְׂיָקוּם מִמַּטְתּוֹ יֹאמֵר מוֹדֵה אֲנִי — שְׂיִזְכֹּר מִיָּד בְּהִקְדוּצוֹ שֶׁהַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא הֵשִׁיב לוֹ נִשְׁמָתוֹ

*Before he rises from his bed, he should say Modeh Ani — so that he remembers immediately upon waking that the Holy One has returned his soul to him.*

Before rising. Before washing. Before coffee. The very first act of Jewish consciousness every morning is acknowledgment.

And notice something worth pausing on. *Modeh ani* contains no name of God, which is precisely why *halacha* permits it to be said before washing hands, in any state of ritual readiness. The first act of the morning requires no preparation, no ritual condition. *Hakaras hatov* does not wait for you to get dressed.

We do not begin the day by asking for what we need, or by assessing what we lack. We **begin** by recognizing what we have already received. Our soul, held in trust through the night, has been returned. That is the first fact of every Jewish morning; and it is a gift. Not because we feel it automatically, we may not feel it at all, may be half asleep, may be dreading the day ahead, but the *halacha* does not wait for the feeling. The words come first. The acknowledgment comes first. And gradually, through the discipline of daily practice, the words become real, until they become who you are.

This is the antidote to Adam's failure. Adam received the greatest gift in human history and turned it into a grievance. Every Jew, every morning, is given the opportunity to do the opposite; to wake up and say, before anything else, I am here because something was given to me, something that I did not earn.

The Jewish people themselves were not immune. In the wilderness, Hashem provided *manna*, bread from heaven, a daily miracle that appeared every weekday morning, like dew on the grass. And the people said:

(במדבר כא:ה) “*Our souls are revolted by this miserable bread.*”

**Rashi's** assessment is devastating: (רש"י במדבר כא:ה) אַף עַל פִּי שֶׁהָיָה טַעְמוֹ כְּכֹל מַה שְׂיִרְצוּ — קִצְהָ נִפְשָׁם בּוֹ

“*Even though it tasted like whatever they desired — their souls were revolted by it.*” Revolted by a gift. The miracle had become routine. The routine had become invisible. And what is invisible cannot be appreciated, and what cannot be appreciated is eventually resented. This is the psychology that *modeh ani* is designed to interrupt — a daily insistence on seeing what is already there before the day has a chance to make it disappear.

And then there is the most astonishing example of all — and it comes from God Himself.

When Hashem speaks the Ten Commandments at Sinai, He does not introduce Himself as Creator of heaven and earth. He says: (שמות כ:ב) אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עֲבָדִים

"I am the Lord your God Who took you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery."

The **Ramban** asks: why did He introduce Himself as the God Who took you out of slavery:

רמב"ן שמות פרק כ פסוק ב: וטעם מבית עבדים - שהיו עומדים במצרים בבית עבדים, שבויים לפרעה, ואמר להם זה שהם חייבין שיהיה השם הגדול והנכבד והנורא הזה להם לאלהים, שיעבדוהו, כי הוא פדה אותם מעבדות מצרים, כטעם עבדי הם אשר הוצאתי אותם מארץ מצרים (ויקרא כה נה).

*The meaning of the expression 'from the house of bondage' is because the Jewish people had been slaves in Egypt, imprisoned under Pharaoh's rule. Therefore, Hashem declared that this great and awesome God should be their God, worthy of their service, precisely because He had redeemed them from Egyptian bondage. Their obligation to serve Him grows out of His act of redemption, as the Torah later says: "For they are My servants, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt"*

This is not a declaration of power. It is the establishment of a relationship. Hashem is saying: "I did something for *you*. I heard your cry, and I came. I know you not as a species I designed, but as a people I redeemed." The relationship is grounded in a remembered act of *chesed* — a moment of rescue that can be named, dated, and retold. This is precisely why we retell it every *Pesach*, in every generation.

Hashem, so to speak, models *hakaras hatov* from the other direction. He reminds us of what He did, not because He needs our gratitude, but because a relationship built on remembered acts of kindness is more morally serious than one built on abstract power. *I took you out of Egypt*. Remember that. Let it shape how you treat the stranger: (שמות כג:ט) וְיָדַעְתֶּם אֶת נַפְשׁ הַגֵּר כִּי גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם  
*You know the soul of the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.*

If gratitude towards God shapes how we treat the stranger, then gratitude toward a country that treats us as something other than strangers is not optional. It is obligatory. Which brings us, on this 250<sup>th</sup> birthday, to the United States of America. Two hundred and fifty years ago, a group gathered in Philadelphia and declared, as a self-evident truth, that all men are created equal, endowed by their Creator with unalienable rights. For the first time, a nation was founded not on ethnicity or dynasty or conquest, but on an idea, and that idea had room in it, at least in principle, for everyone.

**President George Washington** made that principle explicit in his letter to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island, in 1790:

*"It is now no more that toleration is spoken of as if it were the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights, for happily the government of the United States gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance. May the children of the stock of Abraham who dwell in this land continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants."*

President Washington is not merely being polite to a Jewish congregation. He is making a constitutional statement. Jews in America do not live here on allowance. They are here by right, the same right as every other citizen. For a Jewish community that had known, across centuries and continents, precisely the opposite, that had lived always at the mercy of the majority's mood, this was not a political speech. It was a kind of miracle.

**Rav Moshe Feinstein** understood it as such. He had grown up in Czarist Russia, where Jewish rights were nonexistent. And then he came here. In *Igros Moshe, Choshen Mishpat 2:29*, he writes:

הנה בדבר עניני החסד אשר הממשלה שלנו ארצות הברית שבאמעריקא / שבאמריקה / שהשם יתברך ברחמיו המרובים על שארית הפליטה מיהודי כל מדינות יוראפ / אירופה / ושארית גדולי התורה ותלמידיהם הביאנו לכאן ונוסדו מקומות התורה ישנים שמיראפ וגם חדשים, וע"י שמלכות של חסד זו שכל מטרתה הוא להטיב לכל תושבי המדינה המציאה כמה ענינים של פראגראמען לעזור

לתלמידים שבכל בתי הספר שבמדינה שיוכלו ללמוד ולהתגדל בלמודם, שגם מוסדות התורה יש להם עזרה גדולה לתלמידיהם, ודאי כל ראשי הישיבות והמנהלים והתלמידים מכירים בכל טובות המדינה ומברכים לשלום המדינה ולכל העומדים בראשה בכל הברכות. *Regarding the matters of chesed that our government, the United States of America, has performed. God, in His abundant mercy upon the remnant of the survivors of the Jews of all the countries of Europe, and the remnant of the great Torah scholars and their students, brought us here, and Torah institutions were established, both old ones transplanted from Europe and new ones — and through the fact that this kingdom of chesed, whose entire purpose is to do good for all the inhabitants of the country, has created various programs to assist students in all the schools of the country so that they can learn and grow in their studies, and Torah institutions as well receive great assistance for their students certainly all the roshei yeshiva, administrators, and students recognize all the goodness of this country and bless the welfare of the country and all those who stand at its head with every blessing.*

Rav Moshe called it a *malchus shel chesed*. Not a neutral country. Not merely a tolerant country. A country whose relationship to its Jewish citizens is through *chesed*, grace and unearned goodness. And if America's relationship to us is a *chesed*, then our relationship to America is governed by the laws of *hakaras hatov*.

The **Malbim**, in his commentary to *Mishlei* 20:28, explains why this matters so deeply. A ruler who governs by strict law alone, he writes, will have enemies, those upon whom the full force of judgment has fallen. But a ruler who introduces *chesed* alongside law will be loved by his people. And it is *chesed*, the Malbim concludes, that ultimately sustains the throne: *וְסֵדֵד בְּחֶסֶד יִשְׁתָּדֵד* *His throne is sustained by chesed.*

Washington's letter to the Jews of Newport was not required by law. It was *chesed*, like a king going beyond what strict governance demanded, to say: you are not here on sufferance, you are here by right. And it is precisely that *chesed*, the Malbim would say, that sustains. *Malchus shel chesed* does not merely describe what America has been to us. It describes why America has endured.

When Rav Aharon Kotler built Lakewood, when Rav Soloveitchik developed Yeshiva University, when day schools and Bais Yaakovs, Mesivtas and Yeshivas multiplied across every Jewish community in this country, they did so under the protection of Washington's promise: to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance.

*Hakaras hatov* to a country means three things:

First, it means davening for its welfare, as Yirmiyahu commanded: *דַּרְשׁוּ אֶת שְׁלוֹם הָעִיר ... כִּי בְשָׁלוֹמָה יִהְיֶה לָכֶם* (ירמיהו כט:ז) *Seek the welfare of the city, for in its peace you will have peace.*

Second, it means being model citizens, bringing our values of *tzedakah*, *chesed*, and justice into the public square.

And, finally, it means teaching our children to appreciate and feel it, to know that this freedom was not inevitable, not universal, not free of cost, and that those of us who have it owe something in return. This nation may not be perfect, but there is so much to be grateful for.

On the 250<sup>th</sup> birthday of this *malchus shel chesed*, we say: *today*. We acknowledge. We refuse to let the gift become invisible.

There is one final piece, and it may be the most practical of all when it comes to *hakaras hatov*. Every day in the *Beis HaMikdash* there was the *korban tamid*, a daily offering, brought every morning and every evening, without exception, without variation, without regard to the spiritual temperature of the moment. On days of celebration and on days of sorrow. When the *kohanim* felt inspired and when they did not. The *tamid* embodies a principle the Jewish people understood long before modern psychology confirmed it: the most important practices are the ones that do not depend on feeling.

The **Ramchal** in *Mesilas Yesharim Ch 8*, in the chapter on acquiring *zrizus* — alacrity, the energy to serve God with commitment, identifies its primary source. He says it comes from looking to appreciate our gifts:

מה שיוכל להגביר ההתעוררות הנזה הוא ההסתפקלות בלב הטובות שהקדוש ברוך הוא עושה עם האדם בכל עת ובכל שעה, והנפלאות הגדולות שעושה עמו מעת הלידה עד היום האחרון

*What strengthens this awakening is the contemplation of the abundant good that the Holy One does with a person at every moment and every hour, and the great wonders He performs from the moment of birth until the last day.*

For the more a person looks and reflects, the more he will recognize his great obligation to the God who bestows good upon him. And then: *איך יוכלו לראות את טובתו ואת גדולתו ואת נפלאותיו? לכן יודעו לומר ויקים מצוותיו: Since he certainly cannot repay God for His goodness — at the very least let him give thanks and fulfill His commandments.*

The Ramchal is teaching that *mitzvos* themselves are, at their root, the response of a person who knows he cannot repay what he has received. We keep Torah not because we have earned the right to stand before God as equals settling a debt. Instead, we keep Torah because we are overwhelmed by what we have been given — and this is the only currency we have with which to respond. Every *mitzvah* is a *modeh ani*. Every act of Torah is a person saying: I cannot repay You, but I refuse to say nothing.

And then: *איך אדם באיזה מצב שימצא, אם עני ואם עשיר, אם בריא ואם חולה, שלא יראה נפלאות וטובות רבות במצבו: There is no person, whether poor or rich, whether healthy or ill — who cannot see wonders and abundant good in his condition. Hakaras hatov is not a feeling that descends upon the fortunate. It is a discipline of vision available to everyone, in every circumstance.*

The *Korban Tamid* was structured into the day because the contemplation of God's goodness must be *tamid*, constant, or it will not happen at all. The natural human tendency is toward the *lechem hakeleil* — toward seeing the miracle and taking it for granted, toward receiving the gift and forgetting the giver. The only corrective is a practice so regular it reshapes perception itself. That is the genius of Torah. The habit becomes character. The character becomes a life. The person who says *modeh ani* every morning for 40 years does not become someone who performs gratitude. He becomes someone who sees differently, someone who looks at his life and finds, almost involuntarily, that it is full of gifts he did not earn. That is what Torah does to us. It does not demand that we feel grateful. It trains us, over a lifetime, until we cannot help but be. That is exactly what *modeh ani* is. That is what a life of Torah and Mitzvos is all about: not a burden carried by the dutiful, but the response of a person who recognizes he cannot repay what he has received, and so gives thanks and fulfills the *mitzvos*, and keeps looking for opportunities to follow Hashem for the rest of his days.

**President John Adams** wrote, in a letter to his daughter Abigail in 1776, regarding celebrating July 4<sup>th</sup>: *I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated, by succeeding Generations, as the great anniversary Festival. It ought to be commemorated, as the Day of Deliverance by solemn Acts of Devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with Pomp and Parade, with Shews, Games, Sports, Guns, Bells, Bonfires and Illuminations from one End of this Continent to the other from this Time forward forever more.*

Ultimately, *hakaras hatov* is more than a middah. It leads us to recognize Hashem Himself, which according to the **Ramban (Shemos 13:16)** is the ultimate purpose of creation

רמב"ן שמות פרק יג פסוק טז (פרשת בא): והיא כוונת היצירה, שאין לנו טעם אחר ביצירה הראשונה, ואין אל עליון חפץ בתחתונים מלבד שידע האדם ויודה לאלהיו שבראו ... ויפרסמו זה ויאמרו לפניו בריותיך אנחנו,

*This is the very purpose of Creation. We know of no other reason for the original act of creation than that human beings should come to know their Creator and acknowledge Him. They are to proclaim this truth before Him and declare: "We are Your creations." May we continue to thrive in this great country, continue to celebrate...and continue to recognize Hashem in our lives...and see the day when all mankind will see the glory of Hashem...bimhera viyamenu...*