

Becoming a Grateful Person

The Hebrew term for gratitude is *hakarat ha-tov*, “recognition of the good [another has done for you].” Grateful people look forward to helping those who have helped them. Thus, the Bible tells of a devout and wealthy woman who often welcomed the prophet Elisha to her house. During one of his visits, Elisha had his servant say to her, “You have gone to all this trouble for us. What can we do for you?” (II Kings 4:13). The woman, it turned out, was infertile, so Elisha prayed to God on her behalf, and she conceived.

Elisha’s statement to the woman reflects how to acknowledge and repay the generosity of others. He doesn’t start by asking, “What can we do for you?” for this might make the woman embarrassed and too timid to ask for anything for herself. So he first emphasizes all the kindness she has extended to him: “You have gone to all this trouble for us.” By doing so, the woman is made to feel more comfortable requesting something for herself.

In addition to being the right thing to do, gratitude is also a prerequisite for happiness.* Consider the mindset of a grateful person: “Look what Sam did for me; he really likes me. Look how Barbara helped me; she really cares about me.” At the very moment that we cultivate the feeling of gratitude, we also cultivate a feeling of being loved.

Conversely, what is the mindset of an ungrateful person? “The only reason Sam helped me is to make sure I’ll reciprocate when he needs me. Barbara spoke to so-and-so on my behalf so that she can ask me to do something for her.” An ungrateful person reveals not only a suspicious and emotionally stingy disposition, but how profoundly unloved she feels. Ungrateful people cannot imagine that others care enough about them to be generous with no thought of *quid pro quo*.

Think of people you regard as ungrateful. You will quickly realize that not one of them is a happy person. How could they be, living in a world which they see as loveless and friendless?

Then, think of those people you know who express gratitude even for small favors. Aren’t the people who come to mind among the happier people you know?

The emotions most often expressed by the Israelites in the desert are annoyance and ingratitude. Thus, although God supplies them daily with food, the Israelites, angered by their diet’s monotony, complain, “We have come to loathe this miserable food” (Numbers 21:5). When the demagogic Korach tries to stir up a rebellion against Moses, most of the people refuse to take sides between Moses – who has devoted his life to helping them — and his rival. The Talmud (Avoda Zara 5a) depicts Moses as calling the Israelites “ungrateful ones, children of ungrateful ones.”

As is the fate of ingrates, the Israelites -- despite having witnessed more of God’s glory and miracles than any nation before or since (the revelation at Sinai, the crossing of the Red Sea, the daily provision of manna) — seem, throughout their sojourn in the desert to be petulant, untrusting, and unhappy

Cultivating gratitude

Gratitude is rooted in remembrance. Therefore, we must make a conscious effort to recall how others have helped us; if we don’t do this, we will forget. The Bible tells of a great favor Joseph performed for Pharaoh’s former cup bearer, when both men were in prison. During a desperate time in the cup bearer’s life, Joseph interpreted the man’s unsettling, and prophetic, dream, assuring him that he would soon be released from prison and restored to Pharaoh’s good graces. Joseph made but one request of the man; when all this came to pass, he should mention to Pharaoh Joseph’s unusual

ability, and thereby help him gain his freedom also.

Within three days, as Joseph predicted, the cup bearer was freed. Perhaps the man initially intended to help Joseph, but the Bible records: "And the chief cup bearer did not remember Joseph, and he forgot him" (Genesis 40:23). This language is instructive. Because the man did not actively cultivate a remembrance of the favor Joseph had done him, he gradually forgot about him.*

A man who spent his childhood in a crowded apartment on New York City's Lower East Side told me that for several years his struggling parents took into their home a family of their cousins, who were even poorer than they; the children of both families were crowded into one bedroom. What hurt him, however, was that when the cousin's family prospered and moved out of the house, they limited, and eventually ended, contact with his family. The man tried on several occasions to seek them out, to learn if he and his family had somehow offended them. The other family was formal and polite but never responded to his queries, nor initiated contact. He concluded that just seeing him and his family reminded these people of the poverty in which they had once lived, and so, to avoid the pain of that remembrance, they decided to cut off all contact with their former benefactors. Understandable? Maybe, but definitely hurtful and the action of ingrates.

As a corrective against forgetting, try each day to remember at least one favor or kindness extended to you.

Let your gratitude to others last for a long time. A classic American joke tells of a congressman who, when he solicits a constituent's vote, learns that the man is planning to vote for his opponent. "But how can you do that?" the congressman objects. "Don't you remember that time ten year ago when your business burned down, and I arranged for you to get a low interest loan from the Small Business Administration? And what about the time when your daughter got in trouble with the police overseas, and I arranged for her to be released and sent back to the United States? And the time when your wife was sick, and I helped get her admitted to the special hospital she needed?" The voter answers, "That's all true, but what have you done for me lately?"

"What have you done for me lately?" is the ingrate's question. Judaism's perspective is very different. When King David is on his deathbed, and offers his final words of wisdom and advice to his son and successor, Solomon, he reminds him to "show kindness to the sons of Barzillai of Gilead, and let them be of those that eat at your table, for they befriended me [many years ago] when I fled from Absalom your brother" (I Kings 2:7).*

The Talmud teaches that "one who learns from his companion a single chapter, a single law, a single verse, a single expression, or even a single letter, should accord him respect" (The Ethics of the Fathers 6:3). It was probably in fulfillment of this teaching that, when the third-century rabbi, Rav, learned that his earliest childhood teacher had died, he tore his garment as a sign of mourning (see Palestinian Talmud, Bava Mezia 2:11). Some might regard this gesture as excessive. But Rav, mindful that this man had taught him to read and understand basic texts -- thereby opening up to him the whole world of Jewish learning -- felt that his debt remained very deep.

Remember those who have helped you at different moments in your life: family members, teachers and rabbis who inspired you and believed in you; friends with whom you are perhaps no longer in touch who showed you loyalty and warmth; an employer who gave you a break, perhaps when you were young and inexperienced; even if these people are no longer in a position to help you, indeed specifically because they no longer are in a position to help, you should find a way to make known to them how you feel. After all, a person who expresses gratitude only to those who can help him is manipulative, not grateful.*

Treating others with gratitude is not only pleasant for the recipient, it also makes us feel good about ourselves, while forgetting about those who have helped us can later fill us with remorse and shame. The actor Kirk

Douglas writes of his embarrassment at realizing how selfishly he had behaved sometimes when he was younger. As he recalls in his memoir, My Stroke of Luck, "Today I received a fax that reminded me of my faults: 'Dear Mr. Douglas, My father, Paul Wilson, was a friend of yours back in the 40's. I understand that you even lived with the Wilson family when jobs were scarce. My father recently died and amongst his papers we have found old playbills and clippings mentioning you. I would be happy to forward copies if you would like them. Please contact me. Gale Patron."

Mr. Douglas wrote Ms. Patron: "Your fax made me very sad. I loved your father." Indeed, her father had been Mr. Douglas's loyal and generous friend, but "we lost track of each other when I went to Hollywood, but that's my fault. I know Paul. He wouldn't want to seem to be interfering with my activities. It was really up to me... When I received your fax, it was like a kick in the ass. Why was I so self-centered? Why did I forget someone who gave me help and friendship when I really needed it? Gale, your father was a great guy, and a gentleman. We had a lot of fun together. Please forgive me for being so self-absorbed that I didn't look up my old friend..."

Mr. Douglas's words should inspire all of us to recall and reconnect with those who have once helped us, and whom we have let fall out of our lives: "I felt ashamed. Was it sixty years ago? How time flies when you're thinking only of yourself. I would have liked to see Paul again, to thank him for being such a good friend. But now it's too late."

Long-term gratitude has characterized the Jewish community's attitude toward "righteous gentiles" who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust. Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial museum in Jerusalem, conducts ceremonies to honor such people, and various Jewish organizations, and individuals who were themselves saved, provide financial support to help those saviors who are in financial need.

Similarly, it was Leopold Pfefferberg (in the United States, he changed his name to Page), saved by Oskar Schindler, who convinced the Australian novelist Thomas Keneally to write the book that became known as Schindler's List. All of this was done in fulfillment of a vow Pfefferberg made to Schindler shortly after the war, that he "would make his name known to the world."

Remember and acknowledge the good done even by those who later do wrong. By the end of his life, the once modest and loveable King Saul had turned into a paranoid monster (see page 000), but he had not always been that way. When Saul first became king, the Israelite city of Yavesh-Gilead was besieged by Ammon, and King Nachash threatened to gouge out the right eye of every man in the city (see I Samuel 11:2). Within days, Saul mustered an army, attacked Ammon, and saved the people of Yavesh-Gilead. Decades later, when the Philistines killed Saul and three of his sons and put their disfigured bodies on display, the men of Yavesh-Gilead risked their lives by taking down the bodies and giving them a dignified burial (I Samuel 31:11-13).

Bad deeds should be condemned, but never use them as an excuse to forget or ignore the good others have done.*

Express gratitude to your family members and friends. Many of us take the people closest to us for granted, and show far greater appreciation to strangers who have done us a favor than to those who have undoubtedly done us hundreds.

If those close to you have made it known that they do not feel appreciated, resolve that -- for a specified period of time, perhaps the first week of each month -- you will treat your spouse, children, siblings, and parents with the same courtesy and gratitude you extend to strangers.

Show gratitude not only to those who help you, but to those who help the people you love. The Bible records that Boaz was especially caring and generous to Ruth. Why? Because Ruth had been very kind to her mother-in-law Naomi, who was Boaz's cousin (Ruth 2:11-16).

Some years ago, Texas senator John Tower was nominated to become Secretary of Defense. The Senate confirma-

*tion process became quite sordid when rumors started to circulate (many of which were later shown to be untrue), depicting Tower as a drunk, a womanizer, and corrupt. While most of the Democrats instinctively turned against the Republican Tower (who had started his career as a Democrat), Senator Christopher Dodd, a Democrat, rose to speak in the Senate: "Twenty-two years ago, my father, Senator Thomas Dodd, was on trial before this same senate. He was accused of financial misconduct.... [And there was one senator, in particular] who stood up and defended my father and who made sure he was treated fairly, and that man was Senator John Tower. We Dodds don't forget someone who does us a favor. I owe John Tower. I owe him the same fairness and the same careful judgment he showed to my father twenty-two years ago." Later, Dodd broke ranks with his party and voted for Tower.**

To remember the good done for us or someone dear to us -- even after twenty-two years have passed -- is precisely the opposite of the "What have you done for me lately?" mindset.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik (known to his students as "the Rav") was known for being unusually grateful for any favor done to him or his family. Thus, for a period of several months, he traveled to the Bronx from Manhattan every Wednesday to visit a woman who was receiving chemotherapy. Her sole tie to the Rav was that her father had done a kindness for Reb Moshe, Rabbi Soloveitchik's father. When the renowned talmudic scholar, Dr. Louis Ginzberg, of the Jewish Theological Seminary, died, the Rav went to visit the mourning family. The surprised mourners asked him if he knew Dr. Ginzberg, and Rabbi Soloveitchik answered that he had met him once, when Professor Ginzberg paid a shiva call after the Rav's father had died.

Help not just the person, but also the family and friends, of those who have helped you. Jonathan, King Saul's son, was a loyal friend to David, even though he realized that David's elevation to the kingship would come at his expense. Nonetheless, Jonathan protected David from Saul's wrath, and loved David as he loved himself. Jonathan later died, along with his father and two of his brothers, while battling the Philistines. When David became king, he inquired of his servants: "Is there anyone still left of the House of Saul with whom I can keep faith for the sake of Jonathan?" (II Samuel 9:1).

Thank those who work for you, particularly those whose efforts you may take for granted. For example, make known your appreciation to the cleaner who takes care of your house. Don't just make her aware of the things that displeased you. If an editor has improved your manuscript, make sure she knows how grateful you feel for that. Do the same for all those who perform services for you. Make sure they understand how much their help has meant to you.

Thus, when Moses told his Midianite father-in-law Hobab (also known as Jethro) that he and the Israelites were journeying to the land promised them by God, and invited him to come along, Hobab refused, saying he wanted to return to his native land. "Please do not leave us," Moses said. "You know where we should camp in the desert, and you can be our eyes" (Numbers 10:31). Is there any doubt that Hobab left this encounter with the greatest leader of his age feeling understood and appreciated?

One of the many destructive aspects of slavery was that owners grew accustomed to slaves helping them without having to be thanked. The incivility such behavior could engender is reflected in a 1858 statement by South Carolina Senator James Henry Hammond, in which he demanded that the citizens of the North acknowledge their subservience to the South: "You fetch and carry for us. One hundred and fifty million dollars of our money passes annually through your hands. Much of it sticks; all of it assists to keep your machinery together and in motion. Suppose we were to discharge you; suppose we were to take our business out of your hands; we should consign you to anarchy and poverty" Decades of treating black people without gratitude had certainly had an adverse affect on this senator's character; it would seem that whoever had dealings with him, and was in some way dependent on him, was treated with contempt and threats.

Express gratitude to those who help you, but whom you don't see. When checking into a hotel, people tip the bellman who carries up their bags, but most people do not leave a tip for the chambermaid.

Because they rarely meet the chambermaid, they feel no need to leave her anything. But it is good for your character (and obviously good for the maid) to acknowledge the good someone has done you, even if you don't meet the person.

Minimize the favors you have done for others: "If you have done a big kindness for your neighbor, let it be in your eyes a small matter" (The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan 41:11). Otherwise, you may walk around in a constant state of annoyance at others: "Look what I did for so so-and-so and he never mentions it." Society functions best when people remember their obligations; when those who have been helped remember the favor, and when those who have helped another don't dwell on it.

Many people have trouble expressing gratitude because they don't want to acknowledge how dependent they are on others. Therefore, when we remind people of what we have done for them, we often provoke an annoyed response, even hostility, rather than gratitude. Unfortunately, this is a failing among many parents who remind their children of the sacrifices they made for them.

Maximize what others have done for you. "If your friend did you a small favor, let it be in your eyes a big favor" (The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan 41:11). Many of us have a tendency to take for granted or forget what others have done for us.

Unfortunately, we are likely to recall – in great detail – any slight other people have inflicted on us. If you are the sort of person who does this, make an effort to reverse this tendency. Don't take the kindness of others for granted, and be appreciative of each and every favor.

When Reb Aryeh Levine was in his eighties, he had difficulty standing. His student, Yaakov David Perlin, would come to his house every day to massage his feet. A few days before he died, Reb Aryeh told a friend, "In the World-to-Come, no less than this one, I won't forget his kindness toward me."

Repay one person's kindness by being kind to someone else. I read a story of a man whose business was in very difficult straits. His later father's friend offered him a generous interest-free loan. A long time passed before the man was in a position to repay the loan, but when he finally did, the lender refused to accept his check. The man was upset. "I'm not a charity case," he protested. "I always intended to pay you back."

The lender told him. "Many years ago, I found myself in a similar situation, and I also needed a loan. When I went to pay it back, the lender refused to accept the money. I too protested as you did, that I didn't want to be treated as a charity case. The man answered me: "It was indeed a loan, and you do have to pay it back... but not to me. I want you to pay back the loan in the following manner. One day in the future, when you come across a person or a family who needs the money, pass it along... as a loan. And when they come to pay it back, explain the terms of the loan to them, as I just explained them to you." The lender then added: "The money I gave you was indeed a loan, and now it's your turn and obligation to pay it back in the very same manner I paid back my loan. I chose to pay it to you, someday you will pass the money on to someone else."

Sometimes, the person who has done us a great favor needs nothing from us in return (other than thanks), only that we make the same gesture to someone else.

Be grateful to institutions that have helped you, not just individuals. The Midrash teaches: "A person must be grateful to a place where he derived some benefit" (Genesis Rabbah 79:6). This could apply to a school, for example, that gave you a scholarship and/or provided you with a good education. Help such a school financially and speak well of it to others.

Gratitude can apply to much larger institutions, even to countries. For example, Jews owe a debt of gratitude to the United States, a society in which Jews have greater rights and status than in any other society in which they have ever lived. We should apply the admonition of Jeremiah to pray for the peace and prosperity of the government (29:7). Indeed, during the weekly Sabbath service, a prayer for the government of the United States is recited in many synagogues.

Here is one version of a recently composed prayer for the American government, written by Professor Esther Fuchs of Barnard College:

God, whose rule spans all eternity,
Who commanded all humanity to create just governments:
May God preserve and protect our democracy,
Bless and help the elected and appointed officials
of the government of the United States to carry out their duties consistent with the
Constitution and the Bill of Rights.
May God put in their hearts devotion to fairness
and equality for all who live in our great nation
and compassion for the poor and needy among us.
May God inspire them with the courage
to defend the few from the tyranny of the many
and to use the might of the United States
in support of the State of Israel and of other nations that share a commitment to democratic values
and human rights.
May this be the will of God,
and let us say, Amen.

Do not be an ingrate

When someone has treated you well, don't offer a cynical explanation for that person's behavior. This is the criterion used by the second-century rabbinic scholar, Ben Zoma, to distinguish between good and bad guests. The good guest is one who thinks, "How much trouble has my host gone to for me. How much meat he set before me. How many cakes he served me. And all this trouble he has gone to for my sake!" The ungrateful guest regards the situation very differently: "What kind of effort did the host make for me? I have eaten only one slice of bread. I have eaten only one piece of meat, and I have drunk only one cup of wine. Whatever trouble the host went to was done only for the sake of his wife and children!" (Berachot 58a).

Many of us go through life as "bad guests," minimizing the good others have done for us, emphasizing their supposed self-interest in doing so, and praising their kind and generous qualities insufficiently. If someone has done us a favor, we should focus on the good done, not on the fact that the person could have done more, or speculating that she had some selfish motive for acting as she did. We should train ourselves to think, "Look what so-and-so did for me. For that I should be grateful."

There are additional, perhaps even more common, ways to be an ungrateful guest. For example, many people leave a home in which they have been entertained and well treated and, even as they drive home, start criticizing and analyzing their host and her family. Such postmortems often involve speculations about their host's marital relationship, wealth, aesthetic sensibilities, taste in food, intelligence, and children's personalities. To do so is to act as a kafui tovah, an ingrate, toward those who have spent hours, perhaps even days, preparing and trying to make our time with them as pleasant as possible. If you find it hard not to make critical comments about people who have hosted you, at least refrain from doing so for twenty-four hours. By then, perhaps, your negative comments may be toned down.

When someone has helped you, but has perhaps not done all that you requested, focus on what the

person has done, not on what he hasn't. Although this would seem to be morally obvious, many people are so caught up with their own wants and needs that they ignore the good done for them. Thus, Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, one of the great figures of twentieth-century Mussar, once received a letter from a student, posing fourteen unrelated questions on a variety of subjects. Rabbi Dessler wrote back a long reply in which he dealt with thirteen of the questions. He soon received a return letter from the student, who not only noted the omission, but expressed no thanks for what the rabbi had written.

Though Rabbi Dessler was a man of great patience, he was pained by the student's behavior: "Not only [was there no word of thanks], but at the beginning of your letter you reminded me that there was one of your questions to which I forgot to furnish an answer.... Was that the proper beginning [and response] to a letter of ten pages?" He went on to tell the student: "[I mention this] not because I need your thanks, but because of my love for you and concern that you not become a person who denies the good done for him. Recall what I wrote... concerning the words of our Sages, 'Whoever denies the good done him by his friend will in the end deny the good Hakodosh Baruch Hu (God) has done him as well.'"

When the student responded to Rabbi Dessler's rebuke with a letter filled with contrition, the rabbi built up the young man's self-esteem, and made it clear that he totally forgave him: "You are dear and honored in my eyes because you accept rebuke... I enjoyed your letter very much, my precious one."

For more on how to criticize fairly and in a manner that will evoke change, see pp. 000-000).

Never take advantage of anyone who has been good to you. A person who violates this principle is labeled in Jewish writings as "one who returns evil for good." Thus, when Mrs. Potiphar tries to seduce Joseph, her husband's handsome servant, Joseph demurs: "My master... has entrusted me with everything he owns... He has not kept back anything at all from me, except for you, his wife. How could I do such a great wickedness? It would be a sin before God" (Genesis 39:8-9). In the Bible's view, ingratitude, like adultery, is also a sin against God.

Don't point to an institution's imperfections as reasons for not acknowledging the good it has done you. The Talmud teaches, "Cast no mud into the well from which you have drunk" (Bava Kamma 92b). Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik taught that if you studied at a school, even if you come to disagree with the school's approach later, don't "throw mud at it" and condemn it because of those aspects of the institution with which you now disagree.

This dictum is relevant as well for those who have changed their religious orientation. For example, some Jews who grow up Orthodox later leave it for other denominations, while others who grow up Reform, Conservative, or unaffiliated later become Orthodox. Such people often speak with bitterness of the movements in which they were raised, but they should also acknowledge whatever good they gained from their earlier experiences. And those who claim that their experience was entirely negative should reflect on what is perhaps the most unusual of the Torah's 613 commandments: "You shall not abhor an Egyptian, for you were a stranger in his land" (Deuteronomy 23:8). Although the experience of Egyptian slavery included oppression and the drowning of Israelite newborns, the Israelites were commanded not to hate the Egyptians; rather, they were to remember -- along with their recollections of slavery -- how Egypt originally admitted them (at the time of Joseph), saved them from famine, and treated them with generosity.

If we are commanded to remember the good even when mingled with such evil, then we are certainly obligated to recall the good done for us by institutions and denominations with which we later come to disagree.

Professor Noam Chomsky, the M.I.T. linguist and one of the most highly regarded left-wing commentators on politics, often writes of America with venom. During the Vietnam War, he called the Department of Defense "the most hideous institution on earth." In the aftermath of 9/11, Chomsky wrote that the United States was responsible for the great hatred felt toward it by many people throughout the world. The ingratitude expressed by people such as Chomsky for a society that has done so much to spread freedom throughout the world -- it is America's freedom which allows Chomsky to express his anti-American venom -- is a profound violation of the Jewish imperative to "be grateful to a place where one derived some benefit" (Genesis Rabbah 79:6). On an even more basic level, had Chomsky's family not immigrated to the United States, he, and they, would probably have been murdered in the Holocaust.*

When gratitude is not owed

If someone does you a favor for selfish reasons (for example, someone who employs a person who is in the country illegally, and who takes advantage of the person's tenuous status to pay her a very low wage),* you are not required to feel grateful. Bachya ibn Pakuda, the eleventh-century moral philosopher, wrote of such cases: "If we derived some benefit from a person who had no intention of helping us, our obligation ceases and we owe him no thanks" (Duties of the Heart, treatise III, introduction).

If people whom you have helped often act ungratefully (and you have reached this conclusion even after giving them the benefit of the doubt), don't go out of your way to help them in the future (this applies to family members as well); there are no shortage of grateful and good people who deserve to be helped, so why expend your efforts on behalf of ingrates?

As regards gratitude to God, see pp. 000-000.

Final thoughts

Acknowledge the good while you have it. As a rabbi, I often meet with people who have suffered serious losses, either through the death of a close relative, or an irrevocable decline in health or financial fortunes. In such situations, people sometimes say, "Oh, if things could only go back to being the way they used to be, I would be so happy." Yet, I knew these people when things were "the way they used to be," and they weren't so happy, and often complained. A grateful person doesn't express happiness for what he has only when he's lost it. Gratitude consists in acknowledging the good in your life while you still have it.

When Rabbi Irving Lehman was a child in the 1920's, he accompanied his mother to get a bracha, a blessing, from the Lubavitcher rebbe, who was then visiting the United States (it is a longstanding Jewish tradition to solicit a blessing from a person regarded as holy). They stood in line for hours, and when they finally reached the rebbe, he asked her: "How are your children?"

"Baruch Hashem" (Thank God), Rabbi Lehman's mother answered.

"And how is your parnassah (livelihood)?"

"Baruch Hashem."

"How is your family's health?"

"Baruch Hashem,"

"So then what kind of bracha do you want me to give you?" the rebbe asked.

She answered: "Zol nisht farshtert veren" (it should not be spoiled).

Such is the attitude of the pious, a sense of appreciation for what they have, instead of a focus on what they are missing.

On appreciating what you have

"You have the gift of vision. You can see a beautiful spring day, and you can see a smile on a baby's face. You

can sit up, stand upright and [walk]. If a person who is bedridden with a paralyzing muscle-wasting disease were told, 'If you commit yourself to doing good deeds, you can regain your muscle strength and live an active life,' he would not hesitate for a moment to jump at the opportunity... Do not take physical functioning for granted. This is a gift that should be cherished" (Rabbi Abraham Twerski).

"If you cannot be grateful for what you have received, then be thankful for what you have been spared"(Yiddish proverb): If you are often conscious of what's wrong in your life, post this proverb in a prominent place and reflect on what you have been spared:

- If you do not have serious health problems, are you grateful for your good health?
- If your children do not suffer from special, and perhaps untreatable, conditions, are you grateful for that, or do you take your children's well-being for granted?
- If you have enough money to provide for your family's basic needs, do you, nonetheless, often focus on what you lack?

Right now, before you finish this chapter, mark down the many ways in which your life is blessed, and for which you can and should express gratitude to God.

One person to whom I presented this challenge offered the following list:

I am in good health and the chronic disease I do have is treatable by medication. I know that had I lived a century ago, before this medication was discovered, I would be long dead. That thought alone spares me from naively romanticizing the "good old days"; they would not have been good for me. My children have good characters and are intelligent. Some of them have problems in school and problems with self-discipline, but they are kind and lovable people.

My wife knows my faults and still loves me, and I know her faults and love and cherish her. We each trust that the other truly cares about us, and strives to help when the other is in need.

In a world filled with poverty, I am able to support my family. My life would be easier and less tense if I earned more money or our expenses were lower, but our basic needs are met, and there is enough money to make donations to charity. I know that when I focus on the additional money I wish I was earning, it makes me anxious and upset, but it is self-destructive to focus on that which I lack rather than on that which I have.

I love my work, and I thank God that I can earn my living doing something that interests and inspires me, and which I think makes the world better.

I have close friends whom I deeply love and trust. Since my childhood, I have always had deep friendships, and these friendships have made me feel secure, and have helped make my life interesting.

And, perhaps most important, I believe that there is a God Who knows me, Who cares about me, and Who hears my prayers. If I lost my faith, my life would seem meaningless and goodness purposeless. Fortunately, my faith in a God Who knows and cares about me has grown deeper over the years, and for this I am grateful.

* I am grateful to Dennis Prager for this insight.

* Ecclesiastes also relates a story illustrating the cruelty of ingratitude: "There was a little city and few men in it; and to it came a great king, who surrounded it, and built mighty siege works against it. Present in the city was a poor wise man who saved the city with his wisdom, but nobody remembered that poor man" (Ecclesiastes 9:14—15).

* When Absalom launched a revolt against David, the king was caught unawares and fled for his life. He crossed the Jordan River and took refuge in Gilead, where Barzillai and some other notables supplied him and his followers with all their needs, including lodging and food (II Samuel 17:28-29). Later, after David put down Absalom's revolt, he invited Barzillai to remain with him in Jerusalem,

but the eighty-year old man refused, preferring to remain in Gilead, where he had lived his whole life; instead, David took into his court Chimham, Barzillai's son (II Samuel 19:39); on his deathbed, David instructed Solomon to continue this tradition of gratitude (I Kings 2:7).

* The French essayist La Rochefoucauld (1613-1680), wrote that "We find few guilty of ingratitude to us while we are still in a position to help them" (Maxims). A story, probably apocryphal, is told of Andrew Carnegie, the great early 20th century business tycoon. His sister lamented to him that her two sons, who were away at college, rarely responded to her letters. Carnegie assured her that if he wrote them he would get an immediate response. He sent off two warm letters to the boys, and told them that he was happy to send along to each of them a check for a hundred dollars (a large sum in those days). Then he mailed the letters, but didn't enclose the checks. Within days, he received warm, grateful letters from both boys, who noted at the letters' end that he had unfortunately forgotten to include the check. How likely is it that they would have responded so quickly if the check had been enclosed?

* As to how this point applies to institutions and countries, see p. 000.

* See Rabbi Jack Riemer, *The World of the High Holy Days*, volume 1, page 23. Commenting on the incident, Rabbi Riemer notes that during the High Holidays, "the prayer book warns us many times that the sins that we do are recorded and not forgotten, and that they can come back to haunt us years later. But what Senator Dodd did reminds us that the good that we do is also recorded and not forgotten, and that it too can come back to reward us years later."

* It has been rightly observed that if you compare America to the rest of the world, it is very impressive. If you compare it to Utopia, it is awful.

* Although such people are commonly referred to as "illegal aliens," I find it offensive to refer to a human being as "illegal," while the term "alien" conveys the impression that such people are creatures from another planet.

Angels Don't Leave Footprints, pp. 71-72.

Kirk Douglas, *My Stroke of Luck*, pp. 153-156.

A few years after the war, when Pfefferberg learned that Schindler was in difficult financial circumstances, he helped raise \$15,000 for him, a large amount of money in the late 1940's.

Allen Goldstein, M.D., "Personal Glimpses of the Rav," in Michael Bierman, editor, *Memories of a Giant*, p. 176.

Cited in Patricia O'Toole, *Money and Morals in America: A History*, p. 116.

Rabbi Paysach Krohn, *Around the Maggid's Table*, pp. 40-42.

Yonoson Rosenblum, *Rav Dessler: The Life and Impact of Rabbi Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler*, p.161.

Ibid., p. 162.

Rabbi Soloveitchik's teaching is cited in Rabbi Saul Weiss, *Insights: A Talmudic Treasure*, volume 1, p. 66.

