

Yesterday morning, as I was sitting and and working on some High Holiday prep materials, I began going through some outlines that Rabbi Maurice left in his archive. It was like discovering a gold mine. So many High Holiday resources, so much TBI history, so clearly laid out. It made my job suddenly vastly easier. As I sat there saying to myself, "Thank you, Rabbi Maurice, Oh thank you so much!" it occurred to me that I should say it to him directly.

So I phoned up Rabbi Maurice Harris, and I am sure when he saw that it was me calling, he got nervous. What sort of pastoral emergency was I going to ask him to step in for?

He seemed shocked when he understood that I just wanted to let him know that the record-keeping he had done 5 years ago was such a big help to me. He said it "made his day." And it did make me wonder how often it would be possible to make someone's day, just by letting them know how valuable something they had done was.

*Hakarat hatov* - acknowledgement for the good - is an important Jewish value, as much as an important human value. Just as we are commanded to give *tochecha* - to rebuke each other when necessary, one could argue that the whole enterprise of blessing is about *hakarat hatov*.

Many days, I don't feel inspired to offer this *hakarat hatov*. Yesterday helped me remember the power of doing so.

In this week's parasha, *Ki Tavo*, we have a very interesting example of *hakarot hatov*. The Parasha discusses how in Biblical agricultural law, we are instructed to set aside a tithe - a tenth of the produce each year, to be given away. The contemporary practice of tithing, or giving a tenth of one's resources to Tzedakah, is inspired by this.

After it describes the various tithes we are supposed to give, we are told, in Chapter 26, verses 12-15:

When you have finished tithing all the tithes of your produce in the third year, which is the year of local tithing, and you have given it to the Levite, to the stranger, to the orphan, and to the widow, so that they can eat within your gates, and be satisfied; then you shall say before Hashem your God: 'I have set the hallowed things out of my house, and also have given them to the Levite, and to the stranger, to the orphan, and to the widow, according to all Your commandments which You commanded me; I have not transgressed any of Your commandments, or forgotten them. I have not eaten from them in my mourning, neither have I stored away any of it, being unclean, nor made sacrifices to the dead; I have listened to the voice of Hashem my God, I have done according to all that You have commanded me. Look down from Your holy dwelling, from heaven, and bless Your people Israel, and the soil you have given us, as You swore to our fathers, a land flowing with milk and honey.'

Why do we say this? Abravanel (portuguese, 15th century) thinks it is significant that the Torah instructs this declaration to be said after completing the tithe of the third year. You might be asking, third year of what?

It's referring to the seven year Shmitta cycle, the sabbatical cycle. Tithes are allocated differently in different years of the cycle. In some years, they are brought to the Temple in Jerusalem, and the farmer celebrates the abundance by sharing a festive meal with the priests. In the third year however, the Torah specifically mentions that the tithe does not go up the social ladder - it goes down, to the least enfranchised within the community: the Levite, the stranger, the orphan and the widow: all people who would in traditional terms either lack their own landholdings or the means to cultivate their holding.

In chapter 14 of Deuteronomy, a few weeks ago, we read the instruction that in that particular year, the farmer doesn't travel with the tithe, nor do they join the recipients in partaking of it. Instead, the farmer must quickly give it all away in her or his local community.

The commentator Abravanel notes that this is the year in which people might be inclined to fudge in their giving. "Moses realized that the people would be only too willing to bring the other tithes to the Temple, since they partook of it themselves and rejoiced in the pilgrimage involved and the publicity given to their generosity and gifts." This tithe for the poor, however, involves none of that glamour. For this reason, says Abravanel, the declaration in this parasha "was of enormous benefit, in it serving as an incentive to the performance of the precept." The giver will still have their "generosity publicized and they will be praised in the gates."

Abravanel contends that we need to look forward to making this declaration, as a kind of motivation for the otherwise unglamorous commandment to give to the most needy in our own community.

And yet, after all that, it is still a declaration the person makes on her or his own behalf. No one else is announcing it for them. Each one stands up and says, essentially: I got this right. By the merit of this deed, which I did well, may I be blessed.

It's in great contrast to the words of Avinu Malkeinu, wherein we implore Got to be gracious and answer us, though we have no deeds to our credit.

And I think it is more than coincidence that the parasha is read in this season, when we are doing so much work to discern where we may have gone wrong, where we need to surrender and give up control. This parasha reminds us that part of the heshbon hanefesh, the accounting of the soul required in this season, is not just about talking about how we are miserable failures, how we are lower than worms. We also need to acknowledge the power that we have to act for good in the world, the ways that we succeed, the great human potential that, by grace or will, is sometimes actualized. We need to do *hakarat hatov*, acknowledging the good - not just for each other, but for ourselves, as well.

As long as we are reminding ourselves that we are powerless, that we are less than dust and ashes, we let ourselves off the hook. We must remember the full potential of who we can be in the world, and acknowledge ourselves when we live up to it - even if no one else is acknowledging us.

Rabbi Nachman of Breslov has a famous saying: If you believe you have the power to destroy, believe you have the power to heal. Hakarat Hatov begins at home, this parasha teaches. We don't always have the energy to behave the way we'd like in the world, but when we give ourselves the rewards of acknowledgement, that helps reinforce the idea that we *do* have that capacity for good.

Ki Tavo Dvar

In these days ahead, may we have ample to live up to our potential, and may we each receive the acknowledgement we deserve. And when we don't receive that acknowledgement from other, may we have the holy chutzpah to proclaim it ourselves.

Shabbat shalom.