

Rabbi Moshe Walter



Thinking Thanks Is Not Enough

This past week I opened my computer to see the homework assignment my son's rabbi emails every afternoon. After finishing the homework with my son and reflecting on how helpful the daily homework email is, I wrote the following short and simple email to the rabbi: *Thanks! I just want to share that it's extremely helpful to me that you send this email daily. Much appreciated, yasher koach, MW.*

While I didn't think much of the email I wrote, the rabbi did. I was stunned to read the rabbi's reply, which has been reverberating in my mind ever since: *Thank you very much for that feedback. I think you're the second one in 17 years (since class emails were invented) to express appreciation and feedback about how helpful emails are.*



I was astonished by the rabbi's response. Has he only received two thank-yous for his hard work in crafting these emails over 17 years? Do parents not appreciate how helpful these daily emails are? How do parents not notice the time and effort the rabbi takes to produce these emails day in and day out? Does anyone realize that not every rabbi does this?

As I took the time to digest the email, it hit me that *hakaras hatov* (expressing thanks) is one of the hardest areas for us. Do we thank someone who holds the door open for us as we rush to get indoors on a frigid winter day? Do we thank the cashier who rings up our order at the grocery store? Or are we too busy on our AirPods to even acknowledge him? Do we thank the mailman, Amazon driver, or Uber Eats delivery person? Or do we not even notice that a human being is at our door? Do we thank the people in shul who set up kiddush week in, and week out? Do we ever thank the rebbeim, *morahs*, or teachers for their incredible efforts in teaching our children?

And then I realized again that we're not the only ones who struggle with acknowledging the good that others do for us. This struggle stems from man's creation and has continued throughout all epochs of Jewish history. After Adam Harishon sinned and ate from the Tree of Knowledge, Hashem confronted Adam and questioned his behavior. Adam responded, "The woman You put at my side, she gave me of the tree, and I ate." Rashi, commenting on the *pasuk*, quoting Chazal, states that Adam lacked *hakaras hatov*, and his response showed his ingratitude.

Rashi is hinting to us that aside from Adam's sin of not listening to Hashem, he was also exiled from Gan Eden because of this failure to appreciate Hashem's kindness. He was punished not merely for eating from the Tree of Knowledge, but also for being ungrateful. Hashem presented his wife Chavah to him as a gift, and instead of thanking Him, Adam complained that it was she who had caused him to sin.

Adam's ingratitude was every bit as egregious as his violation of the word of G-d was, and his banishment from Gan Eden was due in large part to that. This teaches that the world cannot exist if we don't acknowledge what others do for us. The

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foundation upon which civilization was built was recognition and appreciation for what people do for each other. We need each other and cannot survive without the kindness and goodness that others provide us.

The subsequent generation of Noach was destroyed for a similar reason; human beings took advantage of one another, were unable to respect each other, and didn't appreciate each other. Hashem was forced to bring about a flood that destroyed the world. The First and Second Batei Mikdash were likewise destroyed because Jews took each other for granted and were unable to live together in harmony. The sins for which the Batei Mikdash were destroyed also speak to a lack of appreciation and gratitude for human relationships. Failure to express thanks or appreciation causes a breakdown in the basic fabric of our world.

After thinking much about this brief email exchange with my son's rabbi and reflecting upon the challenge we have in giving *hakaras hatov*, I responded to his email.

Unfortunately, many struggle to express hakaras hatov and say thank you; however, on the positive side, I have also learned that people really do appreciate; they just don't say anything. I have no doubt that many people appreciate your helpful emails, but they just assume this is what must be done by the rabbi and say nothing because it's an expectation they have. That doesn't make it right. Thank you again for your efforts and hard work. We all appreciate it.

I think this is exactly the point; we all do appreciate the mailman dropping off the mail, the person who holds the door for us, the Amazon driver who delivers our package, and each of the volunteers who do a tremendous amount so our shuls can function; we just don't articulate any of it. What we need to do is move our thoughts and feelings from our hearts and minds to our lips and tongue; and express our thanks with sincerity and meaning. Look how much the rabbi appreciated the simple sentiment; and imagine how far-reaching this could be if we all took the few moments to express our thanks to those who help us day in and day out.

This is exactly what Chazal had in mind when instructing us in *chazaras hashatz* to articulate the brachah of Modim. Why is it that throughout *chazaras hashatz*, we simply listen to the chazzan's repetition of Shemoneh Esreh and respond with Amen, but during the brachah of Modim, each of us actually recites the Modim d'Rabbanan?

The Avudraham explains that simply answering Amen to the chazzan's brachah does not suffice. Rather, one must personally thank G-d by articulating the words and expressing the thoughts. It's not enough to think thanks, or to fulfill one's obligation of thanksgiving through a proxy; we must say it and say it aloud. This is a requirement in our relationship with Hashem, and it should be mirrored in our interpersonal relationships as well; with family, friends, neighbors, professional colleagues, and anyone who helps us.

In a pure manifestation of Hashgachas Hashem, as I was writing this article, I received the following email from someone our shul helps financially.

Dear Rabbi Walter, I wanted to write to you to ask you to please tell your congregation how much I appreciate the financial assistance the shul has provided me throughout 2025 and in previous years. The monthly check has allowed me to pay for essential living expenses during a year of rising costs in every sector. Thank you so much for your continued support. With gratitude.

Tears rolled from my eyes as these expressions of gratitude warmed my heart. There is no greater feeling than when someone expresses a genuine thank-you. It is uplifting, heartwarming, and greatly appreciated. We all know how it feels — now let's make sure we make others feel this way as well. Thank you! ♦

Rabbi Moshe Walter is the rav of Woodside Synagogue Ahavas Torah in Silver Spring, Maryland, the executive director of the Vaad Harabbanim of Greater Washington, a popular speaker, and the author of the *Making of Halachah, Minhag, Mentsch, and Siddur* series published by Feldheim.