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HAKKARAT HATOV (GRATITUDE) AND THE MORAL PERSONALITY

JOSEPH—THE PROTOTYPE OF THE MORAL PERSONALITY

In this essay, we argue that in Judaism a key to the moral personality is *hakkarat hatov* (gratitude). In developing this thesis, we begin with an examination of both the biblical narrative of Joseph's struggle in overcoming the wiles of Lady Potiphar and the Talmudic account which complements the biblical text:

He adamantly refused. He reasoned with his master's wife. "My master does not even know what I do in the house. He has entrusted me with everything he owns. No one in this house has more power than I have. He has not kept back anything at all from me, except for you, his wife. How could I do such a great wrong? It would be a sin before God!" (Genesis 39:8–9).

The woman grabbed him by his cloak. "Sleep with me!" she pleaded. He ran away from her, leaving his cloak in her hand, and fled outside (Genesis 39:12). At that moment, his father's image appeared to him through the window and said, "Joseph, your brothers will have their names inscribed upon the stones of the *ephod* (sash of the high priest's robe) and yours amongst theirs. Is it your wish to have your name expunged from amongst theirs and be called an associate of harlots?" Immediately his bow abode in strength (Genesis 49:24). R. Johanan said in the name of R. Meir: [This means] that his passion subdued (Sotah 36b).

What emerges from the above descriptions of Joseph's struggle against sin is the equation of moral turpitude with betrayal. Succumbing to Lady Potiphar would have proven Joseph false to the exalted ideals which his father had set for him, and, at the same time, betrayed the trust of his master. Joseph, of course, carried the concept of betrayal to even a higher sensitivity. Succumbing to Lady Potiphar would do violence to the concept of righteousness itself and hence constitute a sin against God.

Logic does not compel interpreting a test of piety as a test of loyalty to Potiphar. Clearly, it was Joseph's revulsion at being an ingrate which pushed this equation on him. In other words, Joseph's deep sense of gratitude (*hakkarat hatov*) toward Potiphar personalized his dilemma, tearing him between lust and loyalty.

Identifying the underlying forces which made the image of Jacob such a vital factor in withdrawing Joseph from sin is, however, more complex. If Joseph merely gave lip service to Jacob's moral teachings as a means of avoiding friction with him and gaining recognition from him, what influence could these teachings have on Joseph once he was no longer under his father's control? What influence could these teachings have at the moment Joseph faced the seductive power of lust and at the same time was convinced that his father thought he was either dead or hopelessly missing? Overcoming a sin of passion by conjuring up an image of his father could only be efficacious under the assumption that Joseph cherished the moral teachings of his father and harbored a deep sense of gratitude toward him for these teachings.

The role Joseph's reverence for his father plays in extricating him from his trial of passion is understandable in light of the paragon stature our Sages confer Joseph in respect to *kibud av* (respecting one's father).

In one passage, the Midrash informs us that for the entire forty years of the wanderings of the Jewish people in the Wilderness the Ark of the Covenant (containing the Decalogue) and the casket of Joseph traveled side by side. To passers-by this arrangement appeared peculiar. They were, however, informed that this pairing was quite fitting, as it implicitly expressed the sentiment that Joseph fulfilled all the demands of the Decalogue. Focusing on various deeds of Joseph, the Midrash goes on to demonstrate that he scrupulously observed each and every one of the ten commandments. In evidence of his fulfillment of the fifth commandment (the obligation to bestow honor upon one's father), the Midrash cites Joseph's support of his father Jacob along with his entire family upon their arrival in Egypt during the famine (Genesis 47:12).¹

Regarding Joseph as the paragon in honoring his father, Seder Eliyahu Rabbah cites the following verse in support of this assessment: Israel (Jacob) said to Joseph, "I believe your brothers are keeping the sheep in Shechem. I would like you to go to them." "I'm ready," replied [Joseph] (Genesis 37:13).² Given Joseph's awareness that his brothers hated him and he would therefore be exposed to danger, accepting the errand is taken as a mark of extraordinary devotion to his father.³

Further detail regarding the extraordinary depths of Joseph's dedication to parental reverence is provided by *Pesikta Rabbati*: Basing itself on the verse "and the house of Joseph a flame, and the house of Esau for stubble" (Obadiah 1:18), *Pesikta Rabbati* understands that the personality of Joseph is the antithesis of the destructive power of Esau. In this

vein, many contrasts are drawn between the personalities of Joseph and Esau. Two of these dissimilarities relate directly to parental reverence.

In one contrast, Esau is depicted at birth as bent on killing his mother. He does not succeed. Nevertheless, Esau manages to injure her, with the effect that his mother cannot bear children again. In contrast, Joseph is a defender of his mother. When Esau ominously appears at Jacob's encampment, Joseph was ready to give up his life for his mother, stepping in front of her to hide her from Esau's view.

In another contrasting portrait, the focus turns to the glimpse the Torah gives us of Esau's feeling when he was in rage against Jacob for deceitfully substituting himself for him to obtain their father's blessing. Regarding his father Isaac as an obstacle in his design to kill Jacob, Esau wishes his father's end to draw near: He said to himself, "the days of mourning for my father will be here soon. I will then be able to kill my brother Jacob" (Genesis 27:41). In contrast, Joseph was always solicitous of his father's welfare. In his encounters with his brothers in the capacity of Viceroy, both before (Genesis 43:26) and after (Genesis 45:3) he revealed himself to them, Joseph anxiously inquired if his father was still alive.

In still another revealing contrast, the Midrash depicts Esau as an unforgiving man. He sold his birthright to Jacob for a price. Yet, (regretting the sale) Esau later plots against Jacob to kill him. In sharp contrast, Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery for a price and kept the money for themselves. In spite of this, Joseph showed his brothers only love and concerned himself with their welfare.⁴

While the above dissimilarity does not relate to filial conduct toward parents, filial attitudes towards parents can go a long way in explaining the motivational force behind the difference in conduct. *Hakkarat hatov* sensitizes a child to the awareness that sibling discord is cause of anguish for parents. Children imbued with *hakkarat hatov* towards their parents will, accordingly, overlook and forgive wrongs done to them by another sibling, all for the sake of avoiding aggravation for parents. If children, are not imbued with the *hakkarat hatov* sentiment for their parents, the only issue in a sibling dispute will be the rightness of the claims and counter-claims of the disputants. The absence of *hakkarat hatov* may work to convince one or both of the filial disputants to carry on the fight because even the parents will side with them out of the rightness of the claims involved.

The above analysis provides, as it appears to us, an insight into the paradoxical nature of Esau's character. He is depicted, on the one hand, as being exemplar and unsurpassed in the attendance he gave his father.⁵ But at the same time, he is depicted as a vile man, violating even the cardinal tenets of his father⁶, including the explicit textual mention of marrying women which "were a source of spiritual bitterness to his parents"

(Genesis 26:34). The key to this riddle is the absence of the *hakkarat hatov* sentiment as a motivational force behind the attendance and service Esau rendered his father. Esau did not practice the moral teachings of his father.⁷ Nonetheless, as a means of avoiding friction and gaining recognition from his father he gave lip service to them, even to the extent of posing pious questions to his father, questions he invented just for the sake of impressing him.⁸ How much paternal recognition meant to Esau can best be seen by his reaction when he first learns that Jacob had deceitfully stolen the blessing Isaac meant for him: Esau said to his father, “Is there only one blessing that you have my father? Father! Bless me too!” Esau raised his voice and began to weep (Genesis 27:38). To gain this recognition Esau was willing to pay the price of attending to his father in a way no one could match. Such efforts would surely make Isaac indebted to him, and at the very least, insure that Isaac would not examine his deeds too closely. Moreover, the more Esau would give as a son, the more he could demand as a father. Being an exemplary son would confer a religious license on Esau to become a tyrant father. Indeed, tradition has it that Esau commanded his son Eliphaz to murder Jacob.⁹

THE LINKAGE BETWEEN PARENTS AND DIVINITY— *HAKKARAT HATOV*

The *hakkarat hatov* filial sensitivity leads, in our Sages’ thinking, to both an awareness of God and a compulsion to serve Him out of a sense of gratitude. This point is enunciated by Sefer haHinukh (early 13th century) in the author’s elaboration of the *hakkarat hatov* basis of the mizvah of honoring parents:

... A man should realize that his mother and father are the cause of his being in the world, and therefore it is truly proper that he render them all the honor and do them all the service he can. For they brought him into the world, and they labored greatly on his behalf during his childhood.

Once a man has assimilated this trait, he will ascend by it to recognize the good done him by the Lord, Who is the cause of his being and the cause of the existence of all his forefathers, reaching back to Adam the first. It was He who brought him into the world and provided for his needs all his life; who structured him and perfected his body; who gave him a soul and intelligence—for without the soul with which God graced us, man would be as the brute horse or mule. So a man ought to understand well how much effort is owed the service of the Lord.¹⁰

Sefer haHinukh’s theory provides an insight into the third and final element Joseph brought to bear in warding off the advances of Lady Potiphar: Just as *hakkarat hatov* was the underlying force behind Joseph’s feeling that submission amounted to betrayal of both his master and his father, so too was this sentiment the underlying force behind his rejection on the grounds that the contemplated action violated God’s law.

THE PARENTAL ROLE IN FOSTERING THE
HAKKARAT HATOV SENTIMENT

Cultivating the *hakkarat hatov* sensitivity within the parent-child relationship is not a matter of focusing on filial responsibility exclusively. Parents too play a vital role in fostering *hakkarat hatov*. This point emerges from the lesson Mekhilta derives from the spatial arrangement of the Decalogue contained in the Two Tablets of the Covenant (*Shenei Luhot haBerit*). The Decalogue was arranged on two tablets in groups of five¹¹ so that they would be read not only in their vertical order but also horizontally. This spatial arrangement results in pairing “Honor your father and mother” with “Do not covet your neighbor’s wife.” Commenting on this linkage, Mekhilta teaches that he who violates “Do not covet your neighbor’s wife” will beget a son who will curse him and confer honor on someone else.¹²

Since coveting of all sorts is forbidden, Mekhilta’s dictum is generalizable to the stark assertion that coveting diminishes the potential for the parental role. Coveting is diametrically opposed to *hakkarat hatov*. Focusing on the form of coveting which is most likely to bring about total failure in the parental role, Mekhilta concentrates on coveting a neighbor’s wife. Behavior of this sort on the part of the father manifests contempt for the mother of his children, who is the natural object of the child’s love and *hakkarat hatov*. Someone who fundamentally violates *hakkarat hatov* cannot hope to implant even a modicum of this character trait into his child. Ironically, everything the coveting father does for his child may be taken by the child as a *quid pro quo* gesture rather than as an expression of selfless love. With the motives of the coveting father always suspect, his moral teachings will never be taken seriously by the child. *Quid pro quo* will quickly become the guiding principle for the child of a coveting father. With self-gratification directing the loyalties of the child, it is not inconceivable that the child will seek out an authority figure to replace his natural father, lavishing honor on that replacement father and at the same time cursing his natural father.

The flip side message of Mekhilta’s linkage is that a rarefied *hakkarat hatov* sensitivity tempers the coveting drive. We need not go far afield to find the rationalization for this. The more people appreciate what they already have, the less they will be driven to covet what is not theirs.

THE MAKING OF THE MORAL PERSONALITY—
A MODEL

The above analysis of Joseph’s struggle against sin identifies for us the process whereby the moral personality is formed: (1) Parents and educators inculcate youth with ethical norms and moral values; (2) children

internalize these values and in the process develop *hakkarat hatov* toward parents and educators for teaching them these ethical norms; (3) Immoral conduct is deterred directly by the *hakkarat hatov* personality trait. Deterrence is promoted in two different ways: First, *hakkarat hatov* tempers avarice; second, immoral conduct is regarded as betrayal of parents and educators as well as a desecration of sacred ideals.

HAKKARAT HATOV AND THE MORAL PERSONALITY

Judaism offers several psychological insights into the nature of *hakkarat hatov* as an ethical norm. These insights point to an assessment of *hakkarat hatov* as a delicate sensitivity. Fostering the moral personality requires hence a major effort in strengthening the *hakkarat hatov* sentiment from both an individual and societal standpoint.

At once, our Sages felt that *hakkarat hatov* as an ethical norm is a difficult sensitivity to acquire. This attitude can be drawn out by focusing on the mizvah of honoring one's father and mother. *hakkarat hatov* stands as the dominant rationale of this mizvah; i.e., parenthood compels gratitude. Reverberating this theme, *Sefer haHinukh* writes:

Among the bases of this mizvah is the fact that it is proper that a man recognize and bestow kindness upon one who has done him good, and that he not be base, a dissimulator, and one who denies the good done him by another. For that is an evil trait, held most obnoxious both by God and man.

A man should realize that his mother and father are the cause of his being in the world, and therefore it is truly proper that he render them all the honor and do them all the service he can. For they brought him into the world, and they labored greatly on his behalf during his childhood. . . .¹³

Notwithstanding the compelling nature of the claim parenthood has for gratitude, our Sages were well aware that man's devious side could adduce many arguments to deny this claim. Pulling together these specious arguments, R. Abraham Danzig (Prague, 1748–1820) railed:

May the mouths speaking untruth be stopped. For they say that no gratitude is owed parents, for their immediate motive was self-gratification, and the child was merely created incidentally; that with the child born, the Lord made the nature of the parents such that they would raise him, as indeed all animals raise their young, without the young being grateful for this . . . For men who argue in this way show themselves to be, indeed, brutes, whom God denied reason and understanding. Concerning such opinion, our sages say, "Whoever is ungrateful toward his comrade will, in time, be ungrateful to God." For according to their thinking, they need not fear or honor God either, since we are His creations, and it is only proper that one be good and merciful to ones creatures. Doubtless those who say these things deny God in their hearts.¹⁴

Another insight Judaism offers in respect to the ethical norm of *hakkarat hatov* is that a shallow gratitude can dissipate and even turn into

unwarranted hatred. Evincing this proposition is the Midrashic exposition of the verse: “Then a new King arose over Egypt, who knew nothing about Joseph” (Exodus 1:8):

He made himself a denier of the good he owed to Joseph and his people. He said these are not of Joseph’s seed; they are like us; and also Joseph I know not. Did he not know Joseph? He can be compared, said R. Abin, to one who stoned a friend of the King, whereupon the King commanded; ‘Behead him, lest tomorrow he do the same to me.’ The Bible, therefore, wrote concerning him, as it were: Today he does not know Joseph. Tomorrow he will declare: ‘I do not know the Lord.’ This teaches us that denial of the good one’s fellow conferred him is akin to the denial of the existence of God.¹⁵

Pharaoh spontaneously responded with a measure of *hakkarat hatov* toward Joseph for interpreting his dream and proposing an economic plan which would avert disaster for Egypt, by appointing him Viceroy.¹⁶ In addition, Joseph was, at least initially, adored by the Egyptian masses.¹⁷ His popularity spilled over to his family as evidenced by both Pharaoh’s hospitable welcome of Jacob and his family upon their arrival in Egypt as well as his generous offer to settle them in the land of Goshen, which was the most desirable part of Egypt.¹⁸ Astonishingly, when Joseph and his brothers died all this Egyptian good will toward the Jewish people vanished. Not only did the good will dissipate, but it turned into hatred, culminating in a national policy of enslavement and genocide.¹⁹ What justified for the Egyptian people this drastic change in attitude toward the Jewish people? R. Abin answers that as soon as a Jewish assimilationist trend became apparent, Egyptians began to feel that the Jewish immigrants were benefiting from their host country at least as much as they contributed to it. The Egyptian debt to the Jewish people was thereby cancelled and Jewish indebtedness to their host country was, in the eyes of the Egyptian monarch, increased.

Pharaoh’s changed attitude toward Joseph is, however, another matter. The enigma magnifies in light of the Torah’s recording that Joseph’s actions as Viceroy enormously enriched Pharaoh’s treasuries.²⁰ Indeed, one school of thought has it that the new King referred to at Exodus 1:8 was a foreign invader;²¹ an ethnocentric foreign invader would be driven to implant his own culture into the conquered country, and would have no interest in recalling Joseph’s contributions to Egyptian society. R. Abin, however, adopts the view that the “new King” was “new” only in respect to his decrees;²² the new king was neither a usurper of the throne nor an invader, but, instead, was the natural heir of a particular dynasty.²³ But distance from an event is capable of altering an individual’s perspective of that event. Joseph’s official actions to deal with the deepening crisis of famine were regarded by the Egyptian populace at the time of their

execution as strokes of genius.²⁴ But respect for genius is not true *hakkarat hatov*. The 20% tax in kind on agricultural produce instituted for the purpose of public storage²⁵ which culminated in the nationalization of the lands,²⁶ fundamentally altered the economic structure of Egypt. Instead of recognizing that their very survival was due to Joseph's prudent policies, survivors of the famine might very well have shifted focus to their landless state and blamed this condition on Joseph. Viewing the 20% tax on their crops in the seven years of prosperity as amounting to nothing more than a vehicle for achieving forced private saving,²⁷ the argument for fixing blame could run as follows: "Since the foodstuff in the public graineries represents private savings, why were we made to exhaust our money, sell our cattle and turn our land over to the state, all to obtain what is in any case our entitlement?" What this argument conveniently ignores, however, is that left to its own devices the Egyptian economy would have produced a much lower output than was the case under Joseph's guidance. Without the tax, the super-abundance would have engendered a tremendous loss in productivity due to a sharp increase in idleness and waste. More basically, the state of art technology could offer no means of storing grain without rottage for the long periods necessary to insure economic viability.²⁸ Without an appreciation of the opportunity cost involved in pursuing alternative policies the Divine wisdom inherent in Joseph's economic rescue policies would not be perceived. Certainly, retrospective focus on a particular component of Joseph's policies could easily lead an embittered soul to deny the enormous national debt owed to Joseph and instead turn the tables and fix blame for his own personal misfortune on Joseph.

JUDAISM'S STANDARDS FOR THE *HAKKARAT HATOV* OBLIGATION

Judaism's appreciation of the delicate nature of the *hakkarat hatov* sensitivity manifests itself in both the extension of the *hakkarat hatov* obligation to surprising circumstances as well as the calling for extraordinary measures to prevent the blunting and debasing of this ethical sensitivity.

Hakkarat hatov goes beyond an obligation to express gratitude to identifiable benefactors. This principle is derived from the conduct of the Patriarch Jacob:

"And Jacob came in complete harmony to the city of Shekhem . . . and encamped (*vayyihan*) before (*et pene*) the city" (Genesis 3:18). . . . Another interpretation: . . . he (Jacob) began to set up bazaars and sell cheaply. This teaches that a man must be grateful to a place whence he derives benefit.²⁹

Connecting the word *vayyihan* to *hanan* (lit., he conferred benefit), the Midrash understands Jacob's gesture of gratitude to go beyond the

conferral of benefits to specific people. Jacob understood that if Shekhem generated for him a state or measure of satisfaction, then the totality of his benefit could not be accounted for by ascription to particular people. If a town generates a feeling of satisfaction, then it is the milieu or environment of the town that is responsible. The environment, in turn, is created by the interaction of the people of the town. The benefit taken as a whole is indeed greater than the sum of its parts. Realizing that the essence of his benefit was the environment of the town, Jacob was moved to show his appreciation by doing something to enhance the very environment which generated for him the advantage.

Another dimension of Judaism's standard for the *hakkarat hatov* ethical norm is derived from Moses' conduct in implementing the first three of the series of ten plagues on the Egyptian people.

In connection with the first two plagues, the plague of blood and the plague of frogs, God commands Moses to instruct his brother Aaron to smite the Nile with a rod as a means of initiating these plagues.³⁰ R. Tanhum comments on why God did not instruct Moses himself to smite the Nile:

God said to Moses: "The water which protected you when you were cast into the Nile shall not be smitten by you."³¹

Similarly, to initiate the third plague, the plague of lice, God commands Moses to instruct Aaron to smite the earth.³² R. Tanhum explains:

God said to Moses: "It is not proper that you should smite the earth which protected you when you killed the Egyptian."³³

Rather than understanding R. Tanhum's dictum as extending the *hakkarat hatov* obligation to inanimate objects, we understand his teaching in a different vein. Since the river Nile and the Egyptian earth played such vital roles in rescuing Moses from life-threatening contact with danger, these entities would naturally conjure up within him intense feelings of *hakkarat hatov*. Out of concern that smiting the very instruments of his salvation might blunt Moses' sensitivity to *hakkarat hatov*, the Divinely instructed task was given instead to Aaron. So precious is *hakkarat hatov*.

POLICIES DESIGNED TO STRENGTHEN THE HAKKARAT HATOV INSTINCT

Since the *hakkarat hatov* instinct is a most vital element in the making of the moral personality, society must constantly be driven to discover ways to strengthen this instinct. What follows is a number of suggestions for the halakhic society designed to achieve the above end.

(1) *Minimizing Conflict and Tension between Parents and School*

While the institution of formal Torah education carries with it many benefits, it makes conflict and tension between parents and the Torah educational enterprise inevitable. Specifically, the Torah teachings of the formal educational enterprise will, at times, be in conflict with the religious attitudes and practices of the home. When the child's allegiances are torn between parents and school, *hakkarat hatov* for both suffers. To be sure, the Torah education enterprise cannot adopt the goal of maximizing harmony between itself and parents without compromising its mission. Nonetheless, ways of both minimizing conflict and promoting good will between home and school must be devised.

The notion that Torah education and growth is a life long experience and goal is a harmonizing force between family and home. The more parents are involved in their own Torah educational growth, the more they will come to perceive themselves and will become regarded by others as partners, rather than clients of the Torah educational enterprise. In the halakhic society, the state must strengthen acceptance of this goal. Economic incentives to encourage the emergence of family-oriented Torah-education programs as well as parent-child study groups represents means of fostering the norm that Torah education is a life-long endeavor. Good will between parents and the schooling system is also promoted when the Torah educational enterprise gives recognition and emphasis in its curriculum of the proper role of the family in ritual law. By dint of the verse . . . "and forsake not the instruction of your mother" (Proverbs 1:9), the child is obligated to follow the practice of his father in matters of ritual law.³⁴ While this obligation does not apply in matters which are in halakhic dispute, stringencies adopted by a father in ritual law must be followed by his son.³⁵ Giving maximum emphasis and application, within halakhic parameters, to the role family tradition plays in determining ritual custom and religious practice catapults parents into a position of prominence and does much to promote good will between parents and school. This good will, in turn, strengthens society's *hakkarat hatov* sentiment for both parents and school.

(2) *Strengthening Alumni Ties with their Alma Mater*

A natural application of the obligation to express gratitude to a place whence one derived a benefit is the *hakkarat hatov* obligation of a yeshiva graduate to his or her *alma mater*. This environment, the product of the interaction of the Torah educational personnel of the past and present, generates benefits beyond what can be ascribed to identifiable individuals.

Indeed, *hakkarat hatov* of the highest demand may very well apply to the Torah educational enterprise. What the highest level of *hakkarat*

