

Voting and Hakarat Ha'Tov

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I am very excited to share that I gained a new skill this past week! For those of you who follow me on social media, you know that I spent the day on Thursday volunteering as an Election Judge for early voting at the Potomac Community Center. I'll be back there again on Tuesday for the General Election. I arrived at the PCC at 6:00 AM--it was still dark as night--and when I walked in, everyone was running around like chickens with their head cut off. I was imagining a team meeting, a big pow-wow in the middle of the room before the doors swung open at 7:00...but instead, people were scrambling in every direction, and I felt like I was the only newbie who didn't have a clue what to do. I asked someone who looked more "official" where I was needed, and was directed to the ballot scanning machines. Well, let me tell you, nine hours later, I can scan paper ballots, electronic ballots. I can tell you what to do if you under-voted or over-voted. I counted and tabulated voter authorization cards, and by the end of the day I was training someone else on the scanner!

It was really an exhilarating experience to observe the voting process from "the other side." People of all backgrounds, young and old, parents with children, elderly people with caregivers, folks who came in with their voter guides and meticulously went through each and every candidate and category. I saw congregants, neighbors, friends. I was complimented several times on my *kipah*, and I shared special moments with kids who were voting for the very first time. But the most memorable interaction of the day was with a short-haired, older woman, with a heavy accent. After she scanned her ballot she thanked me profusely for volunteering, and then, glancing at my yarmulke said, "You know I grew up in the Soviet Union. And I'm a Jew. The right to vote means so much to me." I wanted to give her a hug, which of course I could not do. With masked faces, only our eyes were able to meet, and I saw the depth of gratitude in her heart.

I have never missed the opportunity to vote since I was first able to do so in 1992. I was taught early on that voting is a precious and fundamental right not to be taken for granted. In my grandmother's memoirs she wrote about her father, my great grandfather voting for Wendell Willkie in the 1940 presidential election because he didn't like the idea of FDR running for an unprecedented third time. She wrote about how it was the only time her father ever crossed party lines. I guess he told my grandmother about his whole voting history! These commitments run long and deep in my family. And I have long believed that voting is, in fact, a mitzvah...and by mitzvah I don't mean 'a good deed' or a 'nice Jewish thing to do,' I mean *a religious obligation*. But I couldn't really find a source to back this up. The Torah certainly didn't promote democracy as a form of government, if anything it advocates a benevolent monarchy. The Talmud is rather skittish about secular authorities...understandable when you consider that the regime our Sages were dealing with was the Roman Empire. The Shulchan Aruch, the Mishneh Torah and other codes of Jewish Law don't contain explicit instructions to vote or participate in the secular political process, though they don't forbid it either. But my interaction with this former Soviet Jew celebrating her right to vote in a free country pointed me toward what I now believe is the source of this mitzvah. And that is, *hakarat ha'tov*.

Hakarat Ha'tov literally means "recognizing the good," and more colloquially means showing appreciation or gratitude. The biblical source of *hakarat ha'tov* is the institution of *bikkurim*, the presentation of the first fruits of *eretz Yisrael* to demonstrate gratitude to God for the fertility of the land. The word *hakara* means to see with cognition, to recognize, to discern. That means there is so much good all around us, so much blessing, so much beauty; but it's the act of recognizing it, acknowledging it that is the mitzvah. This starts as soon as we open our eyes in the morning when, rather than reaching for our cell phones, or kvetching about our aches and pains, we say *Modeh ani lifenacha*, Wow! I'm alive! Thank you God! Or when we say that prayer *Modim anachnu lach* in the Amidah for all the *niseach ve'tovotecha she'bechol yom imanu*, recognizing "all the miracles and goodness in our lives every single day." When we say *berachot* before or after partaking in something wonderful in the world, that too is an act of *hakarat ha'tov*. So what about voting? My new friend from the former Soviet Union is really remarkable. She didn't complain about the candidates, or criticize the Electoral College, or fuss about how those amendments on the ballot are written in such convoluted language. She didn't express any frustration with this particular election or all the controversy surrounding it. What she expressed was pure, sincere *hakarat ha'tov*. 'I live in a country that allows me to vote and participate in the political process. I live in a country where I can be a Jew and practice my faith freely and without fear of state sponsored persecution. I live in a country where I can walk into a community center and be assisted by a Jew wearing a yarmulke and thanked for coming out to vote on a rainy day.' Voting is definitely a form of *hakarat ha'tov*. And just as we are obligated to express gratitude for other blessings in our lives, I believe we are obligated to vote as an expression of gratitude for being citizens of this admittedly imperfect, but ultimately remarkable country.

The Talmud records that Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai: "From the day the Holy One of Blessing, created the world, no one thanked God, until Leah came and thanked God, as it is stated: ["And she became pregnant and gave birth to a son, and she said,] *Ha'pa-am odeh et Hashem*...'This time I will give thanks to God,' and so she named her son *Yehuda*, [which means gratitude or thankfulness] (Genesis 29:35).

Can you imagine, all those generations prior to *Leah Imeinu*, prior to our matriarch Leah never expressing a word of gratitude to God? According to the midrash ingratitude was something that causes God tremendous disappointment. There is so much to be thankful for; so much good to acknowledge. One way to do that is to vote...by mail, in person... the means of voting is irrelevant as long as you do it. In that way we show *hakarat ha'tov* to God and to the United States of America for being a place of profound blessing to the Jewish people and to all humanity.