

No Shortcuts to Gratitude

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Studies have shown that individuals tend to overestimate how often they feel and express true thankfulness. A recent study, available at <https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rsos.180391>, found that people seldom received expressions of gratitude for their efforts in providing for others, with a rate estimated at about 5%. This is not a defense but a symptom of entitlement that is the antithesis of our ethos and halachic system. We should consider whether, in our conversations, written correspondence and personal interactions, we are more grateful or disparaging. It can be a productive and even healthy exercise to review what we have written in the past or what we have recorded, or even to ask the people closest to us for feedback. The Metzudat Dovid (Tehillim 92:2) says that there is an ethical component of expressing gratitude, which falls under a broader category of doing what is “good and straight.” Perhaps because we often can fall short of this objective, our liturgy is filled with scripted texts of

thanks, such as *Modeh Ani*, *Modim*, and *Birchat Hamzon*. The Sefer Hachinuch (606), in explaining why we need to be coerced to say thank you, proposes that maybe if you say it, you will begin to mean it. Expressing our gratitude induces us to think more clearly and to ultimately give more consistent expressions of the truth.

Chazal acknowledge that finding the time and focus to properly thank Hashem is a great challenge in our busy lives. Therefore, we have special days set aside for this goal. The Redak (Tehillim 92:2) contends that Shabbat is the day set aside for thanking Hashem because on this day we are both physically and spiritually available for this purpose. The Holiday of Chanuka presents a yearly opportunity and responsibility to emphasize our gratitude towards Hashem. This is most likely why the Rambam codified the laws of Hallel within his section on Chanuka. Unlike on Shabbat, when this is an aspect of the day, on Chanuka the expression of gratitude defines the eight-day

holiday. The addition of *Al Hanisim* is placed in the “thank you section” of *Birchat Hamazon*. In explaining the inclusion and location of *Al Hanisim* in *Birchat Hamazon* the Mishna Berura (Hilchot Chanuka 682:2) emphasizes gratitude as the essential theme of Chanuka.

Considering the role that showing gratitude to Hashem has as the central component of Chanuka, it is surprising that no mention of Chanuka can be found in the *Al Hamichya* which is recited following the eating of many food items, including *Sufganiyot*. While there are inclusions for Shabbat, Rosh Chodesh and most other Chagim, there is no mention of Chanuka in this bracha. While in general the seasonal inclusions of the *Birchat Hamazon* that are found in *Ya’ale Veyavo* find some form in *Al Hamichya*, the Mishna Berura (Hilchot Chanuka 682:2) stresses the necessity to omit any such inclusion for Chanuka. There are several approaches to addressing the omission of Chanuka in the *Al Hamichya* (see Igrot HaGrid Berachot 3:13 and Tzitz Eliezer 9:33:2). I want to offer a suggestion based on something that I heard directly at a talk given by Rav Noach Oelbaum shlita when he suggested that expressing gratefulness to Hashem cannot be formulated with

a shortcut, but requires complete articulation and communication of the content and details of the basis of our thankfulness. The *Al Hanisim* prayer is the manifestation of this ideal expression of gratitude to Hashem. This answer is based on the fact that the *Al Hamichya* is (Berachot 37a) an abridged version of the longer typical *Birchat Hamazon*. As such, the additions we make to the *Al Hamichya* are also shorter, abridged versions from the *Ya’ale Veyavo* insertion. However, Chanuka, the holiday of gratitude demands extensive thanks and, in a situation, where only an abridged bracha is offered, it is preferable to remain silent than to offer a shortcut thank you. When we thank Hashem for miracles or gifts, we must spell out the reasons for our gratitude. Anything less than this undermines the objective of communicating gratitude.

While we are all saddened that our *chagigot* and many other forms of celebrations will be greatly tempered this year, we hold on to the most essential aspect of these special days. This is true, especially this year in expressing our appreciation to our Creator & Sustainer and to all of those who continue to provide us with physical, emotional and spiritual support.