



MUSSAR PROGRAM

CLASS #7



REACHING FOR A LEVEL WHERE
EVERYTHING IS FOR THE GOOD.

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The Mussar teachings on gratitude are tough, because they don't let us feel sorry for ourselves, no matter how little we may have. One Mussar master began a talk with a thump on the table and the words, "It is enough that a human being is alive!" Then he ended his talk right there.

There is a story – probably urban legend, but full of truth nonetheless – concerning the famous violinist Itzhak Perlman. One evening, Perlman was in New York to give a concert. As a child he had been stricken with polio and so getting on stage is no small feat for him. He wears braces on both legs and walks with two crutches. Perlman labors across the stage slowly, until he reaches the chair in which he seats himself to play.

As soon as he appeared on stage that night, the audience applauded and then waited respectfully as he made his way slowly across the stage to his chair. He took his seat, signaled to the conductor to begin, and began to play.

No sooner had he finished the first few bars than one of the strings on his violin snapped with a report like gunshot. At that point Perlman was close enough to the beginning of the piece that it would have been reasonable to have brought the concert to a halt while he replaced the string, to begin again. But that's not what he did. He waited a moment and then signaled the conductor to pick up just where they had left off.

Perlman now had only three strings with which to play his soloist part. He was able to find some of the missing notes on adjoining strings, but where that wasn't possible, he had to rearrange the music on the spot in his head so that it all still held together.

He played with passion and artistry, spontaneously rearranging the symphony right through to the end. When he finally rested his bow, the audience sat for a moment in stunned silence. And then they rose to their feet and cheered wildly. They knew they had been witness to an extraordinary display of human skill and ingenuity.

Perlman raised his bow to signal for quiet. "You know," he said, "it is the artist's task to make beautiful music with what you have left."

We have to wonder, was he speaking of his violin strings or his crippled body? And is it true only for artists? We are all lacking something and so we are challenged to answer the question: Do we have the attitude of making something of beauty out of what we have, incomplete as it may be?

Water from the Tap

The Hebrew term for gratitude is *hakarat hatov*, which means, literally, "recognizing the good." Practicing gratitude means recognizing the good that is already yours.

If you've lost your job, but you still have your family and health, you have something to be grateful for.

If you can't move around except in a wheelchair, but your mind is as sharp as ever, you have something to be grateful for.

If you've broken a string on your violin, and you still have three more, you have something to be grateful for.

When you open up to the trait of gratitude, you see clearly how much good there is in your life. Gratitude affirms. Of course there will be things you are still lacking, and in reaching for gratitude no one is saying you ought to put on rose-colored glasses to obscure those shortcomings. But most of us tend to focus so heavily on the deficiencies in our lives that we barely perceive the good that counterbalances them.

This condition is especially common among we who live in a world permeated by advertising that constantly reveals to us all the things

we *don't* have – and tells us how satisfied we would be with ourselves and our lives, if only we would buy their product.

There is no limit to what we *don't* have, and if that is where we focus then our lives are inevitably filled with endless dissatisfaction. This is the ethos that lies behind the great Talmudic proverb which asks, "Who is rich?" and then answers, "Those who rejoice in their own lot." (Avot 4:1)

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter once noticed that a fancy restaurant was charging a huge price for a cup of coffee. He approached the owner and asked why the coffee was so expensive. After all, some hot water, a few coffee beans and a spoonful of sugar could not amount to more than a few cents.

The owner replied: "It is correct that for a few cents you could have coffee in your own home. But here in the restaurant, we provide exquisite decor, soft background music, professional waiters, and the finest china to serve your cup of coffee."

Rabbi Salanter's face lit up. "Oh, thank you very much! I now understand the blessing of Shehakol – 'All was created by His word' – which we recite before drinking water. You see, until now, when I recited this blessing, I had in mind only that I am thanking the Creator for the water that He created. Now I understand the blessing much better. 'All' includes not merely the water, but also the fresh air that we breathe while drinking the water, the beautiful world around us, the music of the birds that entertain us and exalt our spirits, each with its different voice, the charming flowers with their splendid colors and marvelous hues, the fresh breeze – for all this we have to thank God when drinking our water!"

When you live charged with gratitude, you will give thanks for anything or anyone who has benefited you, whether they meant to or not. Imagine a prayer of thanks springing to your lips when the driver

in the car next to you lets you merge without protest, or when the water flows from the tap, or the food is adequate?

When gratitude is well-established like that, it is a sign of a heart that has been made right and whole. Gratitude can't coexist with arrogance, resentment and selfishness. The chassidic teacher Rebbe Nachman of Breslov writes, "Gratitude rejoices with her sister joy, and is always ready to light a candle and have a party. Gratitude doesn't much like the old cronies of boredom, despair and taking life for granted."

The Nile and the Honda

Precisely to whom should we feel thankful? In the Torah, when Moses is bringing down the plagues on Egypt, he isn't the one who initiated turning the Nile River into blood and bringing frogs from the river. His brother Aaron invokes those plagues. The medieval commentator Rashi explains that the river had protected Moses when he was an infant, and therefore he could not start a plague against it. God was teaching Moses a powerful lesson in gratitude: We can have gratitude even for inanimate objects.

Whenever Rabbi Menachem Mendel, the Kotzker Rebbe, replaced a pair of worn-out shoes, he would neatly wrap up the old ones in newspaper before placing them in the trash, and would declare, "How can I simply toss away such a fine pair of shoes that have served me so well these past years!?" (I felt the same way when I gave away my 1984 Honda that had ferried me so reliably for 18 years.)

The Mussar teacher Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian (1872-1970) was once talking to a student after prayers, and at the same time was folding up his tallis. The tallis was large and he had to rest it on a bench to fold it. After he had finished the folding, Reb Elyah noticed that the bench was dusty, and so he headed out to fetch a towel to wipe it off. The student to whom he was speaking realized what Reb Elyah was doing

and ran to get the towel for him. Reb Elyah held up his hand. "No! No! I must clean it myself, for I must show my gratitude to the bench upon which I folded my tallis."

Who is a Jew?

If these models tell us that we can be grateful to rivers, shoes, cars and benches, which help us involuntarily, how much more so to human beings who have free will and who help us consciously out of the goodness of their hearts. Or to the mysterious Source from which our lives come.

When Leah, wife of the patriarch Jacob, had her fourth child, she named him "Yehudah," which means "I am grateful," to reflect her gratitude to God for the gift of another son. Yehudah is the source of the name of the Jewish people (Yehudim), revealing the very direct tie between Judaism and gratitude. An examination of the Jewish prayer book shows it to be primarily concerned with expressions of gratitude.

Gratitude opens the heart, and that's why it provides a fine orientation equally to the inanimate, human and divine dimensions of the world.

The graph of the quality looks like this:



Your homework this week is to practice *hakarat ha'tov*, which means that you need to do something that will cause you to recognize the good in your life. How easy it is to figure out what is missing or wrong in a situation, but it takes training to see that the glass is at least half full, if not more.

The following true scenario was described to me by a student:

My 13-year-old daughter is having a tough time with insomnia/anxiety, and I was with her for four hours last night, from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m. At about 1 a.m. I started to get mad, and I let her know. I became aware that my heart was racing and I was fuming. Then the thought of "gratitude" came into my mind, and I asked myself: "What can I find to be grateful for in this situation right now?"

Almost immediately, my heart softened as I thought of my daughter, knowing that she was not a demon child keeping me awake, but my dear, sweet girl. I was happy and grateful that I could be with her late in the dark cold night, and be there to help her as she struggles."

This is where you want to get to as well. You want to be able to find the good wherever you might happen to be, even in the midst of a difficult situation.

This won't happen just because we discuss it here. The Mussar masters were very astute in recognizing that in the midst of a trying situation, all our learning and convictions are likely to fly out the window. Only by *practicing* do we equip ourselves with tools that ready us to meet life's tests in new ways.

There is an individual in the Talmud whose name is Nachum Ish Gamzu. His name can be translated as "comforted is the person who says 'this too'." When you read the stories that are told about him, the

meaning is made perfectly clear. No matter what terrible thing befell him in life – and the Talmud is graphic in listing his misfortunes – or what uncertainty he had about what lay around the next corner, Nachum Ish Gamzu always responded to life in the same way: "*Gam zu le'tovah*," he would say. "This too is for the good." Such was his sense of gratitude.

Your first task is to memorize the phrase "*gam zu le'tovah*" – this too is for the good. Repeat it several times to yourself. "*Gam zu le'tovah*." This too is for the good. Got it?

Now you have that phrase firmly in mind. But will it be there tomorrow when you find yourself stuck in traffic or having just dropped an heirloom vase? To ensure that this tool will be there when you need it, your practice is to repeat this phrase every morning this coming week. You may already do the Jewish practice of reciting Modeh Ani when you wake up in the morning, which expresses gratitude. But even then, repeat *gam zu le'tovah* to yourself. Repeat it quietly, or aloud, or even chant it to yourself (even in the shower, as one student told me he did). Or you can reprogram the screensaver on your computer. The point is to give yourself repeated exposure to this phrase and its meaning as you begin your day.

When *gam zu le'tovah* has been firmly imprinted in your mind, you will find that phrase at the ready whenever something occurs that seems to run counter to your expectations and wishes. You won't have to *remember* to bring that phrase to your mind. From deep within, the reminder that "this too is for the good" will pop up, and the situation you face will suddenly look different. Try memorizing the phrase and doing the morning recitation for one week, and see for yourself.

Your Accounting of the Soul Diary is waiting for you to record your experiences.

Extra Credit

If you are feeling brave, and have a little extra time, here is a gratitude exercise discussed by Rabbi Noah Weinberg in his series, "48 Ways to Wisdom":

Spend one hour writing down everything for which you are grateful.

Most people fly through the first 15 minutes. The next 15 minutes the pen moves more slowly. The next 15 minutes get even tougher, but you can pull through if you include your eyebrows and socks...

The last 15 minutes are excruciating.

Once the list is compiled, add one new blessing each day.

The power of this exercise is clear: You must be conscious of all your existing blessings, in order to appreciate a new blessing that comes your way.

Follow this course and work at it daily. Your gratitude will continue to grow, building a solid foundation for a lifetime of happiness.

Guided Imagery

When you have a quiet moment of introspection, hold a cookie in your hand and read:

Envision a farmer plowing his field from morning till night. He rises the next day at sunrise and plants seeds of wheat in neat rows. He returns each day to remove the weeds and to irrigate the field. After a few months, tall, green stalks sway back and forth in the soft breeze. The farmer then harvests his field and binds the stalks into sheaves.

The sheaves are delivered to a mill where they are pounded to remove the wheat kernels, and separate the chaff. Next, the wheat kernels are ground into flour. The flour is poured into sacks, loaded into a truck, and delivered to a bakery. The baker then measures the flour into a big mixing bowl and adds eggs, sugar, cocoa, and water. He forms the dough into balls and places them on baking trays. Next he slides the baking trays into a pre-heated oven. After 15 minutes he removes the trays of fresh baked cookies and places them on cooling racks.

Soon another worker arranges the cookies in boxes and loads them onto a truck. The driver delivers the cookies to the market, in which you purchased the cookie that you are now holding in your hand.

Contemplate the process of photosynthesis, providing the precise amount of rays from the sun, which is 93 million miles away. Consider how water evaporates from the salty seas and turns into sweet rain to water the earth. Then reflect how a tiny seed that is planted in the brown earth begins to grow and develop into a living plant. How amazing is the growth of food from seeds! A single grain can produce more than a thousand new grains. One grain of wheat can produce 300 ears.

Look at the cookie in your hand. Who has worked so many wonders to provide this cookie for you?

Now eat the cookie – and savor every bite!

- *Guided Imagery by Rabbi Moshe Miller*
- *Rabbi Yisrael Salanter story from "Tevunah" by Rabbi Yisrael Shlomo Gordon, quoted in: "Torat Yisrael M'Salant"*