

### *Hod* – Gratitude

By Alan Morinis, Founder

#### INTRODUCTION TO WEEK FIVE

*Tomer Devorah* says:

When one learns Mishnah, which comes from the Left, one has a specific association with *hod*.

This enigmatic comment is all Rabbi Moshe Cordovero has to say about the quality of *hod* in this context. He is referring to the *kabbalistic* Tree of Life which features both *gevurah* and *hod* on the left side, paralleling *chesed* and *netzach* on the right. As we have learned, *gevurah* means “strength” and specifically the quality of restraining. This is the dominant quality of the left side of the Tree of Life, and that relates it to the Mishna because the Mishna is the first authoritative post-biblical codification of Jewish law, and law inherently has the quality of *gevurah*.

In a deeper sense, the left side of the Tree stands opposite the right, creating the balance that allows for true expression. That alignment positions *Hod* opposite the generosity of *netzach*. The word *hod* itself comes from the same root as the Hebrew word *hoda’ah*, which means giving thanks, acknowledging, or admitting. When we appreciate that much of what we have has been gifted to us, we are inspired to give to others.

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Our generation is unquestionably blessed with more abundance and comfort than any previous group of human beings ever, and so isn’t it ironic that there is so much ingratitude for the many blessings in our lives? Perhaps, but perhaps the two go hand in hand. Rabbi Yisrael Salanter wrote: “Humankind is immersed in this pursuit [for material success] with all its heart and soul, to gather and collect, to increase acquisitions and add to one’s property. There is no end to all his labor, for there is no limit to this longing.”<sup>1</sup>

Rav Yisrael is perfectly aligned with the sages, who said “One who has one hundred coins desires two hundred; one who has two hundred, desires four hundred.”<sup>2</sup> Do we recognize the truth in their further saying “No one leaves this world with half their desires fulfilled”? Materialistic desire is never satiated.

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<sup>1</sup> *Ohr Yisrael*, p. 115.

<sup>2</sup> Midrash, *Kohelet Rabbah* 1:13.

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The aspect of gratitude that the Mussar teachers focus on is called *Hakarat HaTov*, which literally means, “recognizing the good.” They call on us to foster this recognition because our tendency is to be unable or unwilling to recognize the good that others have done for us or the many gifts that they have bestowed upon us. Even if we appreciate the importance and the scope of gratitude, it can still be difficult to recognize the blessings that surround our lives and the many good ways we benefit from others. Why is that?

Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe explains<sup>3</sup> that when I acknowledge that I have received benefit from someone, that automatically creates the feeling that I am indebted to them, and we find it distasteful to feel obligated. Because we so dislike that feeling of obligation and may lack the humility to accept being in someone else’s debt, we prefer to ignore or even deny the good. And so, we come up with rationalizations that free us from recognizing the good.

The Mussar classic *Duties of the Heart*, by Rabbi Bachya ibn Paquda, offers<sup>4</sup> additional reasons that cause us to ignore the many blessings that life bestows upon us.

First, ibn Paquda says we tend not to feel appreciative because we are too absorbed in worldly things and in the enjoyment of them. He points out that physical pleasures can never be fully gratifying and so we pursue them endlessly, which keeps us focused on future pleasures and never feeling gratitude for what we already have.

Second, we are so used to our gifts that we don’t even really see them anymore. In all areas of life, we tend to grow so accustomed to the many blessings that they appear to us as typical, permanent, unremarkable features of our lives. We are blinded to all the good that is in our lives, for which we really could and should be grateful.

Consider for a moment why it is typical to feel more grateful to a stranger for something he or she does for you than to a close relative? It seems that the closer our relationships, the more we get from one another, and in response the less appreciative we become.

Ibn Paquda’s third insight is that we are so focused on the travails and afflictions we suffer in this world that we forget that our very being as well as all we own are among the good things that have been gifted to us.

He concludes that what comes out of these factors is that “many good things are left unenjoyed, and the happiness to be had from them becomes tainted either because people do not recognize the good in it, or they do not realize its value.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Alei Shur* volume 2, pgs. 280-1.

<sup>4</sup> In his introduction to “*Sha’ar ha’bechina*.”

<sup>5</sup> pp. 68-70 trans. Yaakov Feldman.

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Continuously deepening awareness of the blessings and gifts in your life will bring you boundless energy and joy. It will create a desire to be generous and kind. Tuning in to the good others give to you is the most powerful means to deepen your relationship with others and with God which, ultimately, is the way we align ourselves with the purpose for which we were created.