



Temple Rodef Shalom

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Hakarat Hatov – Seeing the Good

I'm sure many of you are familiar with this story from the Talmud as retold by Rabbi Lawrence Kushner:

The splitting of the Red Sea, was one of the greatest miracles, but not so for two Israelites, Reuven and Shimon, who had a different experience. Apparently, the bottom of the sea, though safe to walk on, was not completely dry but a little muddy, like a beach at low tide.

Reuven stepped into it and curled his lip. *"What is this muck?"*

Shimon scowled, *"There's mud all over the place!"*

"This is just like the slime pits of Egypt!" replied Reuven.

"What's the difference?" complained Shimon. *"Mud here, mud there; it's all the same."*

And so it went for the two of them, grumbling all the way to freedom. For Reuven and Shimon the miracle never happened. [Shemot Rabba 24.1]

Do you know anybody like that, always complaining about something? Miracles surround us, if we only open our eyes to them. On Rosh Hashanah I spoke about looking inward with love and compassion. Today, I'll focus on looking outward at the world around us and recognizing the good. In the *Modim* prayer, part of our daily service, we are reminded that we are surrounded by beauty and goodness. We thank God for God's miracles that are with us daily; and for God's wonders we experience in every season, and at all times.

There is a Jewish value or "soul trait" called "hakarat hatov". It's usually translated as gratitude, but a more accurate translation is "recognizing the good". Recognizing the good in the world and in others requires making a shift in perspective, to seek out the good in all situations. Seeing the good is an internal principle, a way of seeing the world.

The action of hakarat hatov is giving thanks.

The action of hakarat hatov is expressing gratitude.

The action of hakarat hatov is saying a blessing, recognizing the good, the beauty, the holiness in everything.

Yes, bad things happen, and people make bad choices, but if we dwell on the negative, we will be brought down. If we see the good and respond with kindness, compassion, and love, we are transformed and lifted up. If we challenge ourselves to see the good, we will.

I'd like to introduce you to Dewitt Jones, a world class photojournalist for National Geographic magazine and motion picture director. He's been giving Ted Talks on the theme of "celebrating what's right in the world". In this video clip he talks about seeing the good and asking ourselves, "What's here to celebrate? What's right with the situation?"

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gD_1Eh6rqf8&t=481s

7:08-9:12

Dewitt teaches us to see the world through "a lens of celebration", and to "celebrate what's right with world". According to Dewitt, Nature says, "hello, hello... I'll fill up the world with beauty and possibility beyond your wildest imaginings, right down to my tiniest seed."

This is true of people as well. Judaism believes that within each person, part of our soul is holy and pure. Challenge yourself to see that goodness and light that shines within everyone.

We are bombarded by all that is wrong with the world. It is so easy to get caught up in being a k'vetch, listing all the injustices the universe has visited upon us. We can become depressed or complacent. We lose sight of those daily miracles that surround us and the knowledge that we have the power to change our world. Hakarat hatov, seeing the good, can help us find balance in our lives.

In the morning Yotzer prayer, we praise God for light and darkness and all of creation. One of my favorite lines in the prayer is "*Uv'tuvo m'chadeish b'chol yom tamid ma'asei v'reishit*" – "In Your Goodness [O God] each day, you continually renew the works of Creation." What a beautiful idea that Creation is a Divine act of goodness!

And so, may hakarat hatov guide our actions. Let us choose the lens we wish to see the world with, and celebrate what is right in the world. Let judgement be replaced by compassion. Let criticism be replaced with love. Let us celebrate that which is right with the world. Let us open our eyes to the holiness, the goodness that exists in each other, even those we don't agree with. Jean Valjean in Les Misarable, sings the words of Victor Hugo, "To love another person is to see the face of God".

Oh God, on this Yom Kippur Day, open our eyes to the beauty, to the miracles that surround us. Help us to recognize and respond to the good in ourselves, in others and in the world.

Kein y'hi ratzon – May this be Your will.

Closing Song

WONDERFUL WORLD

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m5TwT69i1IU>