

chosen words

Personal Growth

A Real Brachah

Gratitude is a trait of refined people. The brutish person grabs and runs, but the refined person recognizes the care and consideration shown by the giver, and acknowledges it with an expression of thanks.

Reciting a brachah is our expression of thanks to Hashem for the vast creation he puts at our disposal. As the refined people we all want to be, it doesn't do to just send a mass-produced, impersonal thank-you note to our Benefactor. Something more personal, more heartfelt, is in order. One way to make it personal is to think about miracle of food—a patch of earth produces a loaf of bread; a piece of wood gives forth a juicy red apple;

clouds of vapor produce cool, clear water. If you didn't see these feats right in front of you, you could never conceive of them.

Another way is to put your own stamp, your own style on a brachah. For one person, a tune might make it come alive. For another, simply enunciating each word slowly might enhance it.

Reciting a brachah serves another important purpose. It enables us to continue the work of Avraham—proclaiming the Name of Hashem. A Jew knows that Hashem's presence fills the universe. But it is our special responsibility to unveil that presence for the rest of the world. Each time we say a brachah, proclaiming

Torah Tools for Personal Growth

Inspiration

Ideas

Excellence

Success

Hashem as the creator, we fulfill that obligation.

And our act affects the object of our brachah as well. It transforms it from a material to a sanctified object, from a sandwich to a testimonial to Hashem's existence.

The ability to say a brachah is more than an obligation. It's a brachah in itself.

Adapted from "What's Wrong With Being Happy?" by Rabbi Yisroel Miller, with permission from Mesorah Publications

Effective Prayer

Tefillah Speaks

The Message is in the Word

Tefillah is not just spoken. It speaks to us—if we learn to understand its words and their facets of meaning.

In the opening blessing of Shemoneh Esrei, we mention the "chasdei Avos." This is translated as the "lovingkindness of the Forefathers," meaning all three Forefathers. Yet only Avraham is traditionally associated with the trait of kindness. Yitzchak is connected to the fear of Heaven, and Yaakov to truth. Is it accurate, then, to mention all the Avos in connection to chesed?

Only when we look at the real meaning of the word chesed do we see that it embodies all three Avos and their primary traits. Chesed's defining characteristic is selflessness, the ability to live for others, to dedicate oneself to a greater cause. The Avos's traits of kindness, fear of Heaven and truth are all encompassed within that definition. By understanding that, we understand the full meaning of what this tefillah is saying to us.

Every word of tefillah is fashioned with many brilliant facets. Like a jeweler assessing a gem, we can only compre-

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Better Relationships

When the Best Isn't Best

"You deserve the best."
 "Be the envy of your friends."
 "Get the finest money can buy."

While these messages may help sell zillions of dollars in consumer items, they also exemplify an ideal that runs exactly contrary to Torah. When we actively draw attention to our possessions and accomplishments, we do our neighbors

a great disservice. We encourage them to stumble over the Torah's prohibition against envy.

What do our exquisite suits, dresses and hats evoke in a family dressed in hand-me-downs? When we treat our child to a birthday extravaganza with clowns and rides, how do the cake-and-ice-cream children feel? And envy doesn't always arise from money. Do we discuss the joys of parenthood with the childless? The strains of raising a talmid chacham with the parent of a slow child?

The expense of clothing a kallah with someone who can't find a shidduch?

Moshe personifies the Torah's teachings on the imperative to avoid *continued on back*



"The real winner is the one who avoids causing envy."



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Righteous or Self-Righteous?

Someone interferes with a person's davening... breaks his last whole shmura matzah... keeps him from getting to a shiur... Surely, Hashem wants this outrage avenged, he reasons. As he rants and raves, he thinks of himself as Pinchas, wielding a sword to defend Hashem's honor.

But is this anger really for the sake of Heaven? Rarely. More frequently, such a person is not a Pinchas, but a grown-up version of a two-year-old throwing a tantrum because Mommy wouldn't let him "help" wash the dishes. In his mind, he's mad because his effort to do good has been thwarted. But Mommy understands that, if his real goal was just to serve her, he would gladly back off and let her finish. Obviously, he has his own agenda.

“Are we attending to Hashem’s agenda, or our own?”

Similarly, when we believe we are angry because our effort to serve Hashem is being thwarted, we should consider that it was Hashem who threw the obstacle in our way. The mitzvah we had set out to do was supposed to be a means to fulfill His will. Now, dealing with the obstacle has become our means to fulfill His will. If we're seriously trying to attend to Hashem's agenda rather than our own, becoming angry has no place on the schedule of events.

Pinchas is the paradigm of righteous indignation. It's important to note that the Torah traces his lineage to Aharon the Kohen, the pursuer of peace. From this we learn that Pinchas' anger was ultimately a means to peace, and any righteous anger must meet this test. A person whose primary focus is on making peace

might find that, in a rare situation, anger is the only means to that end. Otherwise, there's nothing righteous about anger. Shabbos Table Discussion:

How can you judge whether your own anger is truly for the sake of heaven?

Adapted from, "Anger: The Inner Teacher," by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin, with permission from the author

When the Best Isn't Best

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causing envy. When Hashem offered him the chance to lead the Jewish people out of slavery, Moshe declined. More than he wanted to rescue his people and serve Hashem, he wanted to avoid the appearance of bettering his older brother. Only when Hashem told Moshe that his leadership would make Aaron "happy in his heart," did Moshe accept.

Do you deserve the best? Maybe so. But if it can spare others the pain of envy, second best is even better.

Shabbos Table Discussion:

What makes something an extravagance?

Adapted from "Love Your Neighbor," by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin, with permission from the author

Tefillah Speaks

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hend each word's value when we examine each facet and register its light.

To Do: Learn the inner meaning of a specific portion of tefillah.

Adapted from "Shemoneh Esrei," by Rabbi Avraham Chaim Feuer, with permission from Mesorah Publications

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Wholehearted

The Skulener Rebbe zt"l was once hospitalized for an illness. Due to his precarious condition, his heartbeat required constant monitoring. When the Rebbe was at rest or occupied with mundane matters, his heart would beat at a rate of 80 beats per minute. However, whenever he would recite a brachah or pray, the reading would jump to 160 beats per minute.

To the Rebbe, each brachah and each tefillah was an occasion to muster every drop of his energy and concentration. His heartbeat reflected the effort and fervor with which he recited these words. All those who observed the phenomenon could only conclude that they were witnessing empirical evidence of one man's devotion to G-d. But the monitor was only confirming what the Rebbe's students and followers already knew; he literally put his heart into his tefillah.

Shabbos Table Discussion:

What can we do when, despite our resolutions to have more kavanah, we find ourselves slipping back?

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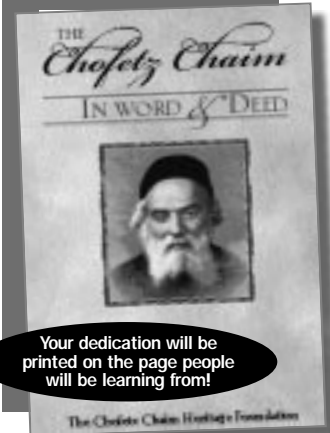
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