

Aliyah Speech
Westmount Shul
July 2018

The concept of Hakaras Hatov, literally recognizing the good, is laced throughout the Torah
We don't have to go far, to the matter of the account of creation
On Day 3, Hashem commanded the earth to give forth trees and vegetation and so it happened.
But later we learn that nothing had sprouted because Hashem had not yet sent rain on the earth.
He was waiting for man to appreciate the need for it, pray for it and then feel gratitude for it.
The animals couldn't pray
The sun and moon couldn't pray
Only man could pray and understand Hashem's goodness and thank Him for his blessings.
We learn from here the power of prayer and gratitude to unleash potential
This goes against what we witness in society today in the non-Jewish world
Egotistical, narcissistic people, both young and old, who have a sense of entitlement, rather than responsibility.
People would be so much happier and fulfilled, if they realized that they are not owed anything at all and instead should be grateful for everything that they have been granted.
The Torah teaches us that when a relationship lacks Hakaras Hatov, it is incapable of real growth and development
What the world calls Teva or nature is just Hashem challenging us to look all around us and feel gratitude.
This is the basis for any relationship with parents, spouses, children and with Hashem
When our foremother, Leah, bore Yehuda, she said Hapaam odeh es Hashem-al cain cara shemo Yehuda
This time let me gratefully praise Hashem
She knew through prophetic vision that Yaakov Avinu would have four wives and 12 children
She felt that Yehuda, her 4th son, was more than her share.
By naming him Yehuda, she found a way to always retain the feeling of Hakaras Hatov that she felt toward Hashem at the time of his birth.
Yehuda is related to Odeh- i will gratefully thank.
An unnamed Rebbitzin was once quoted as saying- "imagine if Hashem would give us tomorrow, only what we thanked Him for today!"
Continuing in this vein, whatever feelings of gratitude that I can genuinely express, is totally insufficient and inadequate, to what our Rav deserves

Just like we begin telling over the story in the Pesach Haggadah, we start with our origins, which may not be so complementary, I will have to admit that 17 or 18 years ago, my wife and I were not Shomer Torah and mitzvos.

We were very far away from Hakadosh Baruch Hu.

We are both children of Holocaust survivors and unfortunately the frumkeit from Europe was not continued here on North American shores, as was the case for many families just trying to survive, regroup, start a new life and forget the nightmare of the systematic annihilation of our people

No one can or should judge- this was just the reality

It is a long story, but Hashem, with His infinite kindness, miraculously guided us to gravitate and connect to Rabbi Michalowicz, the Rebbitzin and their teachings.

We became spellbound by the truth of Judaism and the Creator of the Universe.... But we were so far behind

We learned in retrospect, that Chazal teach that when you do not have spirituality in your life, one needs a large circle of outside interests to achieve self satisfaction.

The emptiness within forces one to turn to external sources of fulfillment, such as trips to exotic places, various hobbies, sports and G-d forbid even to immorality

But physicality can never satisfy spiritual yearnings and so the person is forced to seek greater and ever more glorious external aids to fill that inner vacuum.

This is the Yetzer Hara at work pressuring a person to expand and it becomes a vicious cycle.

I had no day school experience

I had no Yeshiva learning

I could barely read

I couldn't write my name

With infinite patience and skill, the Rav was able to guide me along, teaching me how to read properly and negotiate the Siddur

He was able to lower himself so to speak, to teach us basic skills that we would carry with us, to a more advanced level of Yiddishkeit

A mashal for this would be like Einstein with all of his genius playing games with his grandchildren at their level.

It is not as glamorous as teaching gemara, but with the Rav's background as a day school Rebbe, he had the knowledge and teaching ability to pull it off.

I can only imagine how frustrating some days must have been

Slowly, slowly we moved on to tefilla, brachos, Chumash with Rashi, Shulchan Aruch, Mishneh Berura, Rambam, Navi and so on to Gemara

He opened our horizons to other respected branches of Orthodox Judaism studying Chasidus, Rabbi Nachman and the Ba'al Hatanya amongst others

But we went way beyond that to delve into the hashgafa of true Orthodox , Torah Judaism and living a Torah lifestyle 24/7, not feeling that our Judaism is a burden and try to cram it into our more important secular schedule.

We learned to look forward and love to daven to Hashem three separate times per day, not rushing through the tefillos or Chas v'Shalom talking and valuing the repetition.

We were taught the importance of Tachanun, and not to look forward to any excuse to avoid supplicating to Hashem

We learned to love the holy Shabbos, a taste of the World to Come.

Minimizing our mundane work on Eruv Shabbos, accepting the Shabbos early, ending it late, and feeling its depth and beauty

One can know the entire Maseches Shabbos and yet still not know what Shabbos is.

We learned that it is insufficient to merely know the halachos of Shabbos, in cold thought and logic. Shabbos is not simply an idea.

The Rav revealed it to us in a living sensory mode, as an unmediated reality that we can taste, see and feel.

Stressing the importance of Shalos Shudos, coming close to Hashem as a kehilla, and singing out the Shabbos with incredible melodies and feeling

And of course loving Hashem and the deeper meaning of the Shema

We learned to appreciate the Chagim and their intricate laws and the true meaning of Simcha and joy.

We were taught a true understanding of the days of Chol Hamoed and not to denigrate these days in any way by working

We learned the paramount importance of Torah learning in our lives and not wasting time

Understanding that a Jew in love with Hashem cannot have other competing loves such as TV, movies, sports, unfiltered internet to name a few

Understanding that a shul is a miniature Mikdash and has to be treated as such, by minimizing mundane talking and joking

The incredible significance of Shalom Bayis, but not using it as an excuse or crutch for not fulfilling one's obligations to Hashem

Why we were put on planet earth to bring down Hashem's glory and improve those middos that are most challenging for us

Mussar teachings always interspersed in our learning and Shiurim, focusing on humility,

nullifying our ego, elimination of anger, letting things go, gratitude, avoiding

machlokesim, respect for Talmidei Chachamim, Yiras Shamayim, to name just a few

The prominent importance of Tzedakah and its complex laws, always simplified to everyone's level for our maximal understanding

The amazing kindness, opportunity and miracle of Teshuva, taught through many of the major Meforshim, including of course Rabbeinu Yonah.

Understanding that this illusory world (the Alma D'shikra) is only the corridor to Olam Haba, minimizing our Taivos for Gashmius and focussing on our middos development and loving all Jews. Realizing that achieving closeness to Hashem is the top priority.

Understanding what Tisha B'av is all about and appreciating the enormity of the destruction
Recognizing how bereft we are without the Beis Hamikdash and being able to cry over it.

We are so out of place in this galus living amongst the goyim

Knowing that it is not the land and the buildings of Yerushalaim that we miss, but the supreme connection with Hashem that Yerushalaim represents. Understanding what we have lost.

Understanding the importance of yearning for the Mashiach, instead of focusing on all are other wants and desires during prayer. We wouldn't have to worry about all these sicknesses, depression and addictions

Understanding that we are Ambassadors of Hashem in this world, an awesome responsibility which requires attention to dress, proper speech, refined middos, and many other details

Understanding that as we grow in our Yiddishkeit, we have to have Hashem constantly before us and we have to nullify our will and desires to Hashem's will

The Rav teaches the value of serving Hashem with joy and song

It is not a time to become frum and learn gemara when the men are dancing around the bima
Singing opens up our soul to achieve closeness to Hashem, especially in the waning moments of Shabbos with our Niggunim in the dark.

After learning how to read, The Rav took the time to make tapes for those inclined to try Chazanos and some of us that lead the services learned it all here in the Shul

Creating so many opportunities for learning morning and night 7 days a week and teaching us that work is just an interruption in our day

Toiling in Torah is not just quantity- it must be quality time free of distractions, on a consistent basis. For this we are rewarded. Success is not in our hands

The importance of asking Shailos and the Rav's ready availability in person, phone or e-mail
And of course listening to the psak or advice.

The importance of in our lives of Emuna- understanding that there are no coincidences and that everything comes from Hashem and is always for the good-whether or not we appreciate it at the time. Life is not about getting what we want. It is accomplishing what we are meant to accomplish.

Understanding that Hashem is more loving and compassionate than we can imagine
He is in control of every moment of our lives

No one else in the world can affect us, other than Him- Ain od Milvado

All the difficult situations we go through are for our benefit.

These are challenges and opportunities for growth

If it could be better, it would be better

We learned what kind of joy we should be experiencing on Simchas Torah, dancing with our holy Torah.

Realizing how fortunate we are that the Jewish people were chosen to receive the instructions for living as opposed to 7 billion people living in darkness

What an incredible holy soul we have as children of the Almighty

Understanding that we have to separate as much as possible from the goyim and live our life on a much higher plane connecting to the Almighty

Much more is expected of us and so much more is at stake.

The Torah is not an academic work, like a university course

It is not a body of knowledge

We learn that it has to permeate into our lives and guide our actions and behaviour.

To cleave to Hashem is the true essence of life

We say ki heim chayeinu v'orech yameinu

We can't be frum in shul and outside "business is business"

The goyim and secular yidden are watching us

We have to sanctify Hashem in our ordinary lives

We read in Megillas Rus That Ploni Almoni told Boaz that he would not marry Rus

The Meforshim explain that he was concerned about his Shalom Bayis if he took on a second wife and he was unsure if one could even marry a Moabite woman

Either way he lost one of the opportunities of a lifetime

We learn from our Rav, when making important decisions in our or our childrens' lives, one should not rely on our own thinking and subjective rationales, but we must consult Da'as Torah

There are hundreds if not thousands of classes on our Shul website, that I certainly took advantage of, for Shiurim that I could not attend in person and I urge everyone to take advantage of this unique opportunity

Hashem should continue to bless Dr. Martin Levin with the Koach and drive to post all of these classes, almost immediately after they have been given. It is a time consuming job for a very busy person and we all appreciate his efforts

We learned that happiness comes from being less focussed on ourselves

We are in control only of our attitude

Look how depressed the whole world is

Go into a bookstore and the largest section is the how to be happy aisle.

Everyone wants to be happy

The Jewish people have the secret

It says in Devarim- "I have placed before you the life and the good"

Hashem defines for us what true life is and what is good

Torah and Mitzvos are our life

They are not like oxygen or water- Torah is life itself

We have had several missions to Israel led by the Rav packed with rich and meaningful agendas, where you can feel Hashem's palpable presence. A land that Hashem watches over 24/7/365 with incredible Hashgacha Pratis and love.

Missions where the chevra comes back energized, closer and unified

There is so much more learning to accomplish with Hashem's help

The Torah is infinite

Anything that I have accomplished in my spiritual development, meagre as it is, the zechus all belongs to the Rav. The debt can never be repaid in full

The Rabbi taught us not to say too much about our wives in public

But for my Aishes Chayil, Shifra Nachuma, just a few words are in order

You have to understand that she was not raised in a Frum Bais Yaakov type of environment

A Bais Yaakov girl understands that if she will be marrying someone striving to be or already is a Talmid Chacham, that he will be spending many hours in the Beis Medresh learning- that is a given, a lifestyle that she wisely chose.

After living a long married life devoid of spirituality, to self-sacrifice without resentment and watch her husband suddenly start to go out to learn Torah day and night is a major achievement in and of itself, worthy of great reward

And also to become a shtickel expert in the laws of Kashrus, Tznius and Shmiras Haloshon and all the laws applicable to women and to become a Ba'las Chesed, constantly learning and striving to improve is something which Hashem is surely watching and deriving nachas.

I am not comparing myself to Rabbi Akiva, Chas v'Shalom- after all I was a lot older when my teshuva process started (just joking)

Rabbi Akiva had a righteous wife, Rachel who endured abject poverty and other hardships for the sake of her husband's Torah study

She was the catalyst in his rise from an ignoramus to the Gadol Hador

He would say to his disciples -"what is mine in Torah and what is yours belongs to her"

Similarly, the minimal Torah knowledge that I have accumulated is from my dear wife's inspiration and self sacrifice, sending me out to learn with a cheerful countenance and waiting for my return from the beis medrash

Her original searching for the truth and meaning in life was the springboard that led us to Rabbi Michalowicz and started us on this path of learning and growth

Again our indebtedness knows no bounds

I would like to say a few words about the beauty of our community

Chazal teach us that the Matzah which K'lal Yisrael took out of Egypt with them lasted for about a month and then in mid Iyar the Mon began to fall.

HaRav Yisrael Belsky Z'tl once asked an incredible question

How could it be that millions of people actually finished the Matzah that they took out of Mitzraim on the exact same day.

After all were all the families the same size?

Were not some families mostly adults and others with many children?

He goes on to explain that in fact some families had indeed finished their supply of matzah days or even weeks before, but those with matzah remaining shared it willingly and happily with their neighbours

Only when all of this shared matzah was consumed, was their the need for the Mon

Hashem recognized and acknowledged the chesed of his children and then brought the Mon

Chesed and sharing is the hallmark of our community and Shifra and I are so proud to be members of this Shul and friends with you for all these years

Love your friend as yourself is very evident here

We speak caringly and with respect

We do not embarrass people

We share other peoples' burdens

We run from machlokesim

We are welcoming with friendly smiles

We honour others verbally and with actions

We yield to the will of others

We don't act haughtily or brazenly

We judge favourably and look for merits in others

We do not speak loshon hara

We are honest, looking for ways to benefit others

We look for ways to do chesed for people

We are generous with our tzedaka

Of course this does not come about automatically

People are genuinely working on themselves and what better example to follow than that of our Rav and Rebbitzin, in their everyday lives- they should remain strong and healthy- Amen!

We say daily in the Az Yashir prayer at the end of pseukei d'zimra, "Zeh Kaili V'anveihu".

Chazal teach us that this infers that we should beautify the mitzvos; for example by acquiring a superior esrog and lulav set for Sukkos, or upgrading one's tallis and tzitzis.

What is less well known, Rav Yeruchem Levovitz z'tl brings down that beautification of mitzvos are not limited to those between man and Hashem, but applies equally to those between man and man

And once again our Shul excels in this by being so welcoming to newcomers, with our hachnassas orchim, with our thoughtfulness, generosity and overall respectful and pleasant behaviour

Rav Moshe Feinstein once said over the famous Medresh, that before Hashem gifted us the Torah, he first went to the other nations and asked them if they would accept it.

They all asked what is written in it and Hashem told each nation, based on their society the hardest commandment for them to fulfill and naturally each one rejected the Torah

We know that the Jewish people said Na'asei V'nishma and were rewarded with two crowns Freikt Rav Moshe a great question.

What if the representatives of the Jewish people also asked Hashem what is in your Torah What would have been the hardest commandment for us to fulfill?

Stealing, murder, and adultery we would have been able to manage.

He answered that it would have been not to be a gossiper, not to say whatever we want, to think before we speak- not to speak loshon hora.

Baruch Hashem, our Shul has worked very hard on this and I am proud of our members

Once again aided immensely by the Rav's expert guidance and personal example.

Our mouths are our greatest tool and we can accomplish so much with our prayers

Hashem should bless us to continue to improve in this very crucial area

I am personally blessed with a wife who will not excuse me from the dinner table unless we have learned a lesson a day on speech from one of the Chafetz Chaim Foundations sefarim, a great resource in this area and highly recommended

What better example of our desire to reach out and help all Jews, than the recent expansion of our Shul to house a Sephardi minyan and to learn from their practices and customs

This is an incredible achievement, of course not possible or feasible without the Rav's vision, leadership, planning and fundraising

We read in Parashas Bamidbar that the Jewish encampment consisted of four divisions, every man according to his flag.

Each group had its own customs and each added a special flavour to klal Yisrael

The focus was to do the will of Hashem.

They may have been divided in customs, but united in goal.

When people do not get along because their style in serving Hashem is different, it is clear that it is not about serving Hashem- it's about serving themselves.

We need to remember that we are all on the same team.

We unfortunately find ourselves in the three weeks once again.

This is a time to reflect on our relationship to one another., especially as it relates to sinas chinam, the sin that brought about the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash.

The Netziv learns that this was not simply a hatred for petty iniquities, but it included a hatred for any Jew who practiced their Avodas Hashem in a different manner than them.

It seems to me that this broad inclusiveness in our Shul, promulgated by our Rav is a Kiddush Hashem, something that Hashem looks down upon with favour.

Hashem loves all Jews, from all walks of life, if they sincerely walk in the way of Hashem. Just as the Jewish people received the Torah in the merit of their unity, we here at Westmount have developed a policy of nurturing individuals from all types of backgrounds and customs, working together towards spiritual growth. This is what Hashem wants to see.

And of course several years ago, we housed a yeshiva for a couple of years free of charge, when the Rav saw that there was a dire need for this in the community. Again an example of thinking out of the box, looking to see how we can assist our fellow Jews and Jewish institutions.

We read Parashas Matos- Massei next Shabbos, describing the 42 travels that the bnei Yisrael made in the desert, before finally being ready to enter Eretz Yisrael, by crossing the Jordan River.

The Rabbis teach us that we all undergo these travels and make critical decisions in our lives, hopefully moving forward spiritually and coming closer to Hashem.

Each move is to rise up to the challenge and achieve a certain spiritual goal in our life. This is one of those critical junctions in our own personal lives—the decision of making aliyah.

I saw a humorous article entitled the top 50 reasons for not making aliyah. I will briefly tell over some of the better ones.

You can't find a real bagel
The cream cheese is awful
No baseball
I am afraid to drive there
There is only one golf course
It is too far from the Caribbean
You can serve Hashem anywhere
I don't want to leave my psychiatrist
The toilet paper is too thin
Falafel gives me indigestion
You can't get the NY Times Sunday edition
The move would be too traumatic for my dog
Iran is building a nuclear bomb
There is no Boxing Day shopping
Hashem must want us to stay in exile, otherwise He would not have put us here.--etc, etc.

For those of us getting up there in age, we can take solace and encouragement from the fact that Avraham Avinu came to Eretz Yisrael when he was elderly, a land filled with idol worshippers.

As Yidden, we all have the genes of Avraham and so we all have the potential to make aliyah a reality, despite our fears and insecurities

With the shocking, skyrocketing assimilation rate in North America, we should at least be telling our children and grandchildren that their future lies in the land of Israel, as some of our members have already done

By supporting our children in Yerushalaim, it is like we are giving them Maaser Sheini. We should view them as family tzaddikim and feel privileged that we have a representative in the Holy City.

We read in Parashas Bo in Makos Choshech- "and to Bnei Yisrael there was light in the places they sat"

The meforshim ask what was this light?

The light was the realization that it was not good where they were sitting and they had to take action to leave.

I don't work for Nefesh b'Nefesh, but are we not in a similar situation now here in Canada in 5778?

We have to be Zocheh to see the light!

Part of our problem here in luxurious North America is that we are so comfortable here.

The Gerrer Rebbe explains that in order to be saved from Galus, one must truly view it as a burden. The 80% who were killed in the plague of darkness did not want to leave.

We have to feel at least a touch of the burden of 2000 years of Galus on our shoulders. Hashem is going to save us-we have to feel the pain of the Shechina and yearn for it.

A secular Jew who rose to prominence in Israeli political circles related that as a child in Czarist Russia, he was once under his Father's tallis, during the prayer for rain.

He said Abba-why are we praying for rain?- it's raining outside.

His Father answered him- that is not our rain!

We live in all four corners of the globe, but we are aliens in a land not our own

Only Eretz Yisrael is truly ours!

In Parashas Chukas, Hashem informs Moshe that he would not be permitted to lead the Jewish people into the land of Israel.

Hashem subsequently commands him before his death to go up to Mt Nevo to at least see the whole land.

Rabbi Frand asks an amazing question

Would Hashem rub salt into Moshe's wounds by tantalizing him with the beauty of the land, only to remind him that he cannot enter.

The answer is that Moshe's attribute of Netzach or eternity would be used in a positive manner.

His burning desire and yearning for Eretz Yisrael, these powerful emotions would become eternal components of our DNA, bequeathed to all Jews in future generations.

This strong connection and yearning that Jews have felt for Eretz Yisrael, that many of us and our children have experienced are rooted in the feelings that welled up in Moshe as he gazed upon the beauty of the Land

This eternally bound his soul and ours to the Holy Land

The gemara in Bava Basra teaches that breathing the air of Eretz Yisrael makes a person wise.

I would like to end off with a story from Yaakov Galinsky in his sefer on the Aseres Yemai Teshuva

This is a story called the Tzaddik and the Farmer

A certain tzaddik was travelling by foot, and as darkness fell, he came to a certain village and after some inquiries, he was directed to a Jewish family in the area.

This was an Am H'aretz and his wife, who greeted him warmly, happy to have such an illustrious guest

He davened and ate, said the Shema and went to sleep

As was his habit he arose at Chatzos, sat on the ground and read the Tikkun Chatzos, a liturgy about the Churban.

He started crying and moaning, which woke up the hostess

She whispered to her husband, to see what was going on as it appeared that there guest likely has a stomach ache.

The host got out of bed and found their guest crouched on the ground in what appeared to be agony

He said to him - Rebbe, What happened?

The tzaddik raised his tear filled eyes and said the Beis Hamikdash was destroyed because of our sins, and I am imploring Hashem that the Mashiach should come already.

The villager was astounded-such a tefilla will work, he asked, incredulously?

Of course, the tzaddik answered. The gates of tears are never closed and Chatzos is an especially auspicious time for davening

The villager rushed over to his wife to relate to her what the tzaddik had told him

She was dumbfounded and sent her husband back to ask what would happen when Mashiach came.

The tzaddik told the farmer the redemption will come and we will all move to Eretz Yisrael.

The villager relayed this information to his wife and returned immediately begging the Rebbe to stop davening, because they had not as yet sold the wheat harvest and could not leave it behind

The tzaddik was in a dilemma.

On the one hand, you are supposed to do whatever your host asks you to do.

On the other hand should the redemption be postponed for a bunch of wheat stalks?

Then he had an idea-Look, don't the goyim harass you all the time?

Haven't they stolen your geese, etc?

The farmer answered-not just the geese, also the chickens and the horse and they have trampled all over the flower beds.

Nu, the tzaddik said-It is better that Mashiach should come and we will go to Yerushalayim with joy and singing and leave the goyim here

This convinced the farmer-he went over to repeat this to his wife.

He returned a moment later and said- Rebbe,my wife suggests that if your tefillah really will be accepted, maybe you can daven that Mashiach will take the goyim to Eretz Yisrael and we will stay here.

Our sages teach in Sanhedrin 97a, that three things come upon us unawares

Mashiach, a precious found object, and a scorpion

For some Mashiach will be a metziah, a precious found object and for others, he will be like the unwanted scorpion.

I give us all a Bracha

Let's hope that we will be counted among the former and the redemption will truly be a salvation for us

Everyone has their schedule and life circumstances, but when the call comes, we have to be able to leave our own personal Mitzraim to serve Hashem in truth

Shabbat Shalom

Sam Friedlander