

# Gratitude from the Torah

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha

## Parashat Shemini

### Who Can We Thank for Our Spiritual Achievements?

#### May It Be Harmful to Raise the Hands Above Our Head Without Prayer?

Ahh, how good it is to wake up in the morning, raising my hands towards heaven, and stretching it out. I love the invigorating feeling of engaging the muscles in my arms and shoulders, and even lifting my feet to stand on my tippy toes. “Thank You Hashem for returning my soul into a recharged body! I’m filled with energy and ready to go about my daily chores to serve You.” During all the years when I have been attending our weekly Meditative Movement class at B’erot, I have made the various Yoga teachers aware that it is vital to express prayer to Hashem, whenever we do a pose with our hands raised above our heads. Actually, raising our hands above our heads without prayer can be harmful. Rabbi Chizkiyah teaches that if a person raises his hands while not in a state of prayer, his ten fingers arouse the accusing forces in the spiritual worlds. However, when utilized properly, the positioning of the hands in prayer has the potential to channel abundant divine influence and sustenance into this world (*Zohar* Part 3:128a). According to the *Zohar*, one may not lift his hands above his head for no reason. Therefore, when lifting the hands during the blessing of *Al Netilat Yadayim* after awakening in the morning, we must begin the blessing right away, as soon as our hands are lifted (*Shulchan Aruch Harav, Hand Positions According to Halacha and Kabbalah*). Each of the fingers corresponds to one of the ten sefirot and these ten spiritual powers are requested to receive the blessings from Above and transfer them Below to bless the person who is making a blessing... (*Zohar* 67b). Then all the sefirot of the *kelipot* (husks) that connect themselves to the extremities of the fingers are made subservient to the Holy King. The sefirot are usually divided into three columns, but they can also be divided into two columns. The masculine sefirot on the right include the upper two center sefirot. The feminine sefirot on the left include the lower two center sefirot. The sefirot are in the state of equilibrium when in their regular three-column state. Dividing them into two columns produces a powerful tension. In such a mode, powerful spiritual forces can be directed and challenged.

#### The Power of Praise and Prayer When Raising the Hands Above Our Head

The tension and force created through polarizing the sefirot to male and female sides generates creation and healing. Therefore, Hashem created the world with both of His hands, so to speak:

**סַפֵּר יִשְׁעֵיהָ פֶּרֶקַח מִחַ פְּסוּקֵי יַד יְיָ יִסְדָּהָ אֶרֶץ וְיַמֵּינֵיהָ טִפְחָהּ שָׁמַיִם קָרָא אֲנִי אֱלֹהִים יַעֲמְדוּ יַחַד:**

“My [left] hand has founded the earth, and My right hand has spread out the heavens” (*Yesha’yahu* 48:13).

Just as procreation involves male and female so does creation and healing (recreation). Hashem created the world with the sefirot paralleling His fingers as it states, “When I behold your Heavens the work of Your fingers, the moon, and stars that You set in place” (*Tehillim* 8:4). These blessings – reflected in the ten fingers of the hands – correspond to the ten sayings by which the world was created. *Yad* also means strength and ability. This alludes to the healing powers of the hands to channel the power of the Almighty. “There is strength in my hands” (*Bereishit* 31:29). This explains why we specifically had the power to overcome Amalek when Moshe’s hands were raised in prayer.

**ספר שמות פרק יח פסוק יא** וְהָיָה כִּאֲשֶׁר יָרִים יָדוֹ וְיָגֵבֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל וְכִאֲשֶׁר יִנִּיחַ יָדוֹ וְיִגְבַּר עַמְלֵק:

“Then whenever Moshe held up his hand, Israel prevailed; but whenever he let down his hand Amalek prevailed” (*Shemot* 17:11).

Becoming ordained as a rabbi is called receiving **שְׂמִיכָה**/*shemicha* which literally refers to placing the hands of the ordaining rabbi upon the head of the one he is ordaining. The first person to be ordained in the Torah is Yehoshua as it states, “Yehoshua the son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moshe **סָמַח**/*samach* – ‘had laid’ his hands upon him. And the children of Israel obeyed him, and they did as Hashem had commanded Moshe” (*Devarim* 34:9). There are many additional examples in the Torah of the power of the hands and using hands to channel spiritual energy. I teach this concept extensively with appropriate spiritual healing exercises in my yearly Healing with the Sefirot Course.

### **Our Accomplishments are in Hashem’s Hands and in the Merit of Our Beneficiaries**

*Birkat Kohanim* (The Kohanim blessing) is also enacted through the lifting and the spreading of the hands in prayer. After Aharon completed offering the special sacrifices on the first day he and his sons served as kohanim, he raised his hands toward the nation and blessed them.

**ספר ויקרא פרק ט פסוק כב**

**וַיִּשָּׂא אַהֲרֹן אֶת יָדָיו אֶל הָעָם וַיְבָרְכֵם וַיֵּרֵד מֵעֲשֵׂת הַחֹטְאָת וְהָעֵלָה וְהַשְּׁלָמִים:**

“Aharon lifted up his hands towards the people and blessed them. He then descended from preparing the sin offering, the burnt offering, and the peace offering” (*Vayikra* 9:22).

Rashi clarifies that Aharon then blessed the Israelites with the Kohanim Blessing. From here the Talmud establishes that the Kohanim raise their hands when proclaiming Birkat Kohanim (*Babylonian Talmud, Sotah* 38a). Rav Shmshon Raphael Hirsch, in his Torah commentary, explains that the raising of the hands indicates that G-d in the heavens is the source of the blessing. “There is no power of blessing innate in the hands of our Kohanim... The hands of the Kohen can only direct upwards towards the One who has promised blessing.” The Kohanim lift their hands to make it clear that they do not bless the people with any magical powers that they possess but rather pray that the Almighty G-d – the source of all blessings – will shower His goodness upon the people. Rav Hirsch notices that in describing Aharon lifting his hands, the Torah spells the word **יָדָיו**/*yadav* – “his hands,” **יָדָיו**/*yado* without the letter vav, this may serve as an allusion that his hands possessed no innate power. It takes a lot of humility to be in the position of bestowal without attributing our spiritual achievements to ourselves. Aharon, in his great humility, realized that not only was his power of blessing in the hands of the Almighty, but it was furthermore completely in the merit of the recipients of blessing – i.e. the Israelites. He was aware that it was the people’s righteous influence that motivated and enabled him to attain his spiritual stature. Aharon’s outstretched hands toward the people expressed his profound, humble gratitude to them for enabling him to achieve his status of greatness. Overcome by these feelings of appreciation and love, Aharon granted the people his heartfelt blessing (The Maggid of Kozhnitz, *Avodat Yisrael*). We can learn from Aharon not to attribute our spiritual accomplishments to our own merit, but realize that it is rather in the merit of the sacred Jews who, through their piety, bring clarity to us, as well. As a Torah teacher, I am constantly tested not to fall prey to the pitfall of pride. I personally experience

daily how my ability to teach depends totally on the students present. If the students are tired or preoccupied, I'm unable to teach well. Yet, when my students really want to receive Torah teachings, new concepts flow to me from Above in their merit. So, I am so eternally grateful for my wonderful students who draw down Torah from Above and allow me to be the channel of this process. It is important to lower ourselves to recognize that we cannot accomplish anything alone, perpetually asking ourselves, "Who am I that I have been privileged to receive all this? We must never forget to acknowledge that Hashem is first of all the source of all our abilities. Additionally, let us recall the role that the people and society around us have played in our achievements. When we acknowledge and appreciate the goodness we have received from our children, students, employees, and those who come to us for healing, we will be driven to bless them, to look upon them with admiration and gratitude. This will motivate us to give back and make as significant a contribution as we can to everyone around us (Based on Rav David Silverberg, *Parashat Shemini* 5781 / 2021).

### Gratitude Focus for the Week of Parashat Shemini -

#### Some Tips for How to Acknowledge How Others Empower Our Ability to Bestow

When I got married as a 20-year-old immature youngster - with a minimum of marriage preparation - I had no idea how to be a good wife, let alone a mother. Before giving birth, the challenge of motherhood may seem overwhelming. Yet, as the need arises, we grow through the challenge. Just as mother's milk is produced according to how much the baby suckles, as our children grow, they draw out of us the ability to bestow them with their needs. While their needs change as they mature, we likewise learn how to rise to the challenge of "*Small children, small problems. Big children, big problems.*" Likewise in general life - whether we have experienced motherhood or not - it is only in the merit of our recipients that we grow to greatness. Here are a few tips for acknowledging the recipients' role in your achievements.

- **Recognize Your Children as Your Greatest Teachers** - While you are showing love warmth and discipline to your children don't forget to acknowledge that our children are our best parenting teachers. Thank Hashem daily for your children even when they are challenging and opposing you. As heartbreaking as your family situation may be, it is specifically through these challenges that you grow as a caring, insightful parent. Keep a parenting diary and note down specific lessons you have learned from your children.

- **Acknowledge Rather than Praising** - Rather than praising or offering rewards, it is beneficial to acknowledge accomplishments and encourage efforts. This will facilitate your children to learn how to value their own accomplishments, rather than only put in effort for adult praise or external rewards. Rewards take away a child's intrinsic motivation or desire to work on something just because it feels good to do so. In contrast, acknowledgment allows a child to assess their own work, and feel satisfied with themselves. Additionally, acknowledgments or encouragements are specific to the activity or effort at hand, rather than vague like "I'm so proud of you!" The specificity ("You are working really hard on putting on your shoes by yourself!") makes our comments more meaningful to our children.

- **Appreciate Your Students Who Give You the Ability to be a Teacher** - "I have learned much from my teachers, more from my colleagues and most from students" (*Babylonian Talmud Ta'anit* 7a). Recognize that most of what you know is due to your students' desire to learn from you. Their interest, intellectual curiosity, and probing questions are what spur you to do the research to provide satisfactory answers. Yet, even more than that, every word that Hashem makes flow from your lips is totally in the merit of your students. It's a conscious decision to acknowledge each of your students positively and by full name, multiple times in a lesson. Students love it when you do.

It is such a simple gift that is so easily given.

· **Recognize the Contribution of Your Employees** - If you are a CEO or in charge of a small company, keep in mind that your employees are what enable you to achieve your accomplishments. Don't forget to acknowledge and appreciate the contributions of each of your employees, without whom you would not be where you are today. Showing gratitude to your team members fosters a collaborative and supportive work environment. Strong team dynamics elevate morale and motivation, fostering a cohesive group working toward common goals. Feeling appreciated can alleviate stress and burnout among employees. The knowledge that their efforts are recognized and valued empowers them to navigate challenges while maintaining a healthy work-life balance.