

Tools of the Trade

Having *hakaras hatov*

I ordered myself a new computer for the first time in almost nine years. As a key tool of my trade as a writer, I found the transition simultaneously thrilling (expected) and deeply bittersweet (unexpected). You see, I rather liked my old computer. One might even say I had come to love it. Forget the fact that it was now slow as a sloth, had a cracked screen, emitted a high-pitched noise and would send me forget-me-not battery drain warnings at the most inopportune times. The fact is, it was mine and the two of us had accomplished quite a lot together over the years: This computer was my partner through writing and editing two books, countless articles and myriads of material for my writing consulting clients. It had recently joined me on a new project and had dutifully recorded and uploaded the first year of my podcast. What's more, it had traveled with me around the world to be there "at the ready" for my work. In short, it not only watched my career develop but aided in the process as the keeper of my innermost thoughts and creative material.

And yet, even though it was time to move on, I feel odd about how much I loathe the new one. Shouldn't I be enjoying the new features, glitch-lessness and ease?

There is a beautiful *Midrash* that Moshe Rabbeinu was not allowed to initiate the first two *makkos* in Mitzrayim out of *hakaras hatov* for the water of the Nile that saved him when he was an infant floating on its waters. My husband recently shared this at our Shabbos table along with a related story about the Kotzker Rebbe, *zy"ta*, who appreciated his pair of shoes so much that he buried them after they were so worn out that he was unable to use them. I'm bolstered by these lessons, as I too have come to recognize how much appreciation I feel towards inanimate objects.

It's not just my computer either. My children are horrified that I drive around in a beat-up 2009 Toyota Sienna with power side doors that are no longer powered, with tape festively

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adorning deep gashes in the side to protect it from the harsh Chicago elements. The CD player has trapped all our favorite CDs in its clutches and yet refuses to play any of them, the struts holding up the back are getting a little too vintage for our mechanic's liking and opening the

trunk takes a series of yanks that I suspect is worthy of a CrossFit regimen. My children have begged me to get a new one, my husband has offered to make that happen more times than I remember, and yet I am perfectly, happily putting my old-fashioned key in that ignition until the day it no longer turns...

But why? As I reflect on it, I can't help but think of the fondness I feel towards it after all this car has done for me: the many places it has successfully transported me, how it

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facing position for each of the kids and how I would pop down the Sienna's little backseat spying mirror to lovingly peer at their wide smiles on their first ride facing me in the driver's seat.

We have wonderful vacation memories in this car, and it contains our after-school activity histories. How could I toss it aside for the next best thing when it has literally taken me on every local adventure I have ever driven on? The sand, glitter and powdered sugar particles imbedded deep in the fabric of the worn interior are proof.

Some of my kids like to frame my connection to these things as "creature of habit" or even pack-rat syndrome, but I know in my heart that it's much deeper than that. I suspect my kids also don't understand because they come from another generation, one where the next shiniest thing is always being thrown in front of their eyes either via advertisement or peer group. Theirs is a generation that also isn't familiar with products "built to last" in the way that previous generations relied on, as it is a documented trend that companies shifted to making

their products less durable over the years so that people would have to become repeat buyers. *Can you believe the hosiery used to be made to NOT have runs?!*

I worry that this generation is too much of a disposable-reliant one. We don't build the muscle memory of connection, attachment and loyalty when we treat things as "one and done." Part of it has to do with how much we have, *baruch Hashem*. Think of even the number of extra toys this generation owns versus ours — and then compare *that* one step further to our parents' toy cache. My father has recounted many times that when he was the young child of immigrant Holocaust survivors, his one toy was a green army figurine, and he would often resort to playing with the decorative top of the lampshade (apparently it could spin and that already was major entertainment).

My stash of toys growing up was a major upgrade over his, but my children's ones are exponential! And because of that, I see how they don't attach as much to *one* treasured toy, and even when they do, it is quickly supplanted by a new favorite.

So what can be done? I think there is a middle ground. One where we can enjoy new things but show *hakaras hatov* to the old ones. We should talk to our children about the *maalos* of keeping things and appreciating them over tossing them to the side for new ones. After all, we all enjoy nice things, but do we spend the extra minute to appreciate the old ones?

Having *hakaras hatov* for the things we love is a training ground for the more elevated *hakaras hatov*



bore all but one of my babies home from the hospital after birth and transported them sleeping happily in their car seats, and the way it competed in the crumb-Olympics as the kids grew. I remember the moment of reinstalling the car seat from backward-facing to front-

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we should feel for those around us and especially towards Hashem. Everything we have is because He has given it to us to help us. He has hand-picked it for us for a reason. It would do us well to internalize that, to give a loving pat to that old thing we used to love using.

In my own experience, I see my message slowly getting through, as just last week I offered one of my daughters a new mattress to replace what I noticed was now a rock-hard one. She demurred, telling me she only wants a new one if we can do something meaningful with the old one, given that she enjoyed so many good nights of sleep on it.

My new computer is sleek but

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unfamiliar. As I sit here writing this (my first article typed onto it!), there is a noticeable difference to the click of the keys, the look of the screen, the interface that I haven't mastered

yet. I have a deep sense that I will eventually come to appreciate it as I will undoubtedly spend countless hours in its company, but right now I can't help but long for my forlorn cracked-screen friend, sitting in the corner unplugged and powered down.

Does all this warrant a diagnosis of "creature of habit" or "*hakaras hatov* practitioner"? Life is all how you frame things, and a voice in my head whispers that while the former might be a spice, the latter is the main ingredient of this dish... After all, as a Jew, *hakaras hatov* is part of our very nature, or in other words, one of our strongest tools of the trade. ●

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