

DARCHAI NOAM**Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם**

(Mishlei 3:17)

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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Va'era – Hakarat hatov (recognising the good)

This week's Parasha of Va'era contains the first seven of the ten plagues. The first two plagues (blood and frogs) involved the Nile River and the waters of Mitzrayim. The third plague (lice) involved the dust of the earth. In the first two cases Aharon had to stretch out his staff over the waters to initiate the plague. In the third case Aharon had to strike the earth with his staff.

One famous question is why Moshe had to ask Aharon do these actions, rather than Moshe doing them himself. Rashi answers this question (see Sh'mot 7:19 and 8:12) by pointing out that the Nile River had protected Moshe when his mother was forced to place him there in the basket (see Sh'mot 2:3). And the ground protected Moshe after he killed the Egyptian who was beating the Hebrew slave, allowing him to bury the Egyptian in the ground so that he would not get caught (see Sh'mot 2:11-12). Therefore, Rashi explains, it was inappropriate for Moshe himself to smite the Nile River or the dust of the earth, as both the river and the dust had done him a good turn.

From here we can learn the importance of hakarat hatov – recognising the good and showing gratitude. But the examples are strange. Obviously the river and the dust have no feelings. So why should it matter if Moshe hits them? The story teaches us the extent to which we should go in this area. If it is inappropriate for Moshe to smite the river and the earth (which have no feelings), then how much more so is it inappropriate for us to be ungrateful to people (who do have feelings) who have done us a favour!

Let's take a closer look at this story and we will get a better understanding of the proper meaning of true gratitude.

The passage of time

Many of us express gratitude immediately after other people have done us a good turn. But how long does our gratitude last?

Let's look at the chronology of events in this story about Moshe.

When exactly did the Nile River protect Moshe? He was about 3 months old when he was placed into the Nile River in a basket by his mother.

When did Aharon strike the Nile River? The plagues started when Moshe was almost 80 years old.

That means that Moshe still had hakarat hatov towards the Nile River almost 80 years after it showed him a kindness! Similarly, we should be recognising and acknowledging goodness that others have shown us years ago. A good example would be showing gratitude to our mothers for having borne us through pregnancy and to our parents for nurturing us when we were helpless children.

What if the person didn't do anything special or difficult?

If someone really goes out of their way to do us a good turn, if they make an extra special effort, then we can clearly see that it is appropriate to recognise and reward that deed accordingly. But if someone just does something that involves no real exertion on their part, surely we don't need to be overly grateful for that that, right?

Again, let's see what the Nile River did for Moshe. Moshe was placed into a basket and the basket was placed into the river. The basket floated. There is a very simple law of physics that states as follows: if the density of a body is less than the density of a liquid, the body will float in that liquid. This principle is understood by nautical engineers and by little kids that like to float things in a puddle. The Nile River did not do anything special for Moshe. It just followed a basic law of physics and did not rock the boat (pun intended). Yet, Moshe was still obligated to show hakarat hatov to the waters of Egypt. Similarly, if someone's actions benefit us, even if they do not involve any special effort on their part, we learn from this story that we are still obligated to be grateful and to appreciate them.

Is once enough?

Many people assume that appreciating someone's kindness once should be sufficient. We can just say thankyou and then forget about it.

However, let's take a look at Moshe's actions. Not only did Moshe avoid smiting the waters for the first plague, he also didn't smite the waters for the second plague. This suggests that we remain indebted to the person that did us a good turn. It is not enough to just acknowledge the good turn once.

What if the person tried to help us but did not succeed or even ended up hurting us?!?

We may assume that if someone tries to help us but ultimately fails or even causes us damage, we do not need to show them gratitude. Let's have a look at what the earth did for Moshe.

The earth covered up the dead body of the Egyptian that Moshe had killed. But the very next day Moshe's action was discovered and he faced capital punishment as a result. The earth failed to successfully cover up the dead body. However Moshe still had an obligation to show hakarat hatov to the earth. Similarly, if someone tries to help us but does not succeed, we still owe them a debt of gratitude for trying.

The message from this story is clear. We should acknowledge whenever anything good comes our way, and be extremely appreciative to others who play a helpful role in our lives.

We often find it difficult to say thank you because showing gratitude acknowledges that we needed the help of other people and that we are not completely independent or in control of the situation. It might hurt our pride or make us feel dependant and needy. It might remind us that we are not perfect, or that we cannot make it through life by ourselves. This is often difficult for many of us and our egos may not appreciate such reminders. To soften the blow, it might help us to remember that:

- Hashem is in charge. Just as He sends us challenges in life, He also sends us assistants to help us along the path of life when He knows that we need help;
- Just as we are often in need of help, so too we are often in a position to help others at other times. The roles are reversed many times over the course of a lifetime –the very person helping us may turn out to need our help someday soon!

Out of all character traits, it was Moshe's humility that he is most renowned for. It takes the humility of the greatest Jewish leader to demonstrate the importance of gratitude to all of us.

Let's try something this week:

1. Be aware of any favour people do for us (or even their efforts to do us a favour) – big or small, successful or unsuccessful.
2. Make an extra effort to express gratitude to each person that helps us in any way.
3. Remind ourselves of the extent that Moshe went to show hakarat hatov to inanimate objects.
4. Remind ourselves that humility is a fundamental and esteemed character trait that starts with gratitude and can lead to greatness.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Allon Ledder

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About Darchai Noam

The passuk in Mishlei (3:17) describes the Torah as follows: "Its ways are ways of pleasantness (Darchai Noam) and all its paths are peace". The Torah is our guidebook for life. It is packed full of good advice as to how we should live our lives.

The aim of the Darchai Noam weekly email is to examine an idea from the weekly parashah relating to good middot (character traits). It will focus particularly on treating each other with respect and how to interact with each other in a more peaceful and pleasant manner. It will also suggest some practical tips for implementing these ideas in our daily lives.

By learning together each week, and making an effort to regularly put the ideas into practice, with Hashem's help we can all gradually improve our character traits and our observance of 'v'ahavta l'reiacha kamocho' – loving one's fellow as oneself.

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