

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Vaera
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Parashat Vaera – Hakarat Hatov (recognising the good)¹

This week's Parasha of Vaera contains the first seven of the ten plagues that Hashem inflicted on the Egyptians. 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 Aharon and not Moshe performed these actions. Rashi answers this question (see Shmot 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 (Shmot 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 (Shmot 2:11-12). Rashi explains that it was inappropriate for Moshe himself to smite the Nile River or the dust of the earth, as he was helped by both the river and the earth.

From here we can learn the importance of hakarat hatov – recognising the good and showing gratitude. But these examples of hakarat hatov given by the Torah are strange. Obviously, the river and the earth have no feelings. So why should it matter if Moshe hits them? The teaching is meant to show us the extent to which we should have hakarat hatov. 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 these events 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 was required to refrain from hitting the Nile River in an act of hakarat hatov **almost 80 years** after it showed him a kindness! Similarly, we should recognise and acknowledge goodness that others have shown us even many years ago. A good place to start 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 out of the ordinary?

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 behaves naturally and does not exert themselves, yet the result of their behaviour helps us out, we might presume that we don't need to be overly grateful for that.

We can learn the answer from analysing 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 both by nautical engineers and by little kids that like to float things in a puddle. The Nile River did not

¹ הוקרת הטוב או הכרת הטוב - recognising the kindness bestowed upon us and showing appreciation and gratefulness to the source of that kindness.

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 were just acting naturally and did not exert any special effort, 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 thank you 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. Acknowledging the good turn once is not sufficient.

What if someone 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 need not 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 protect Moshe. 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 their efforts.

It's in your interest to have hakarat hatov

We can also view this issue from another angle. Why did Moshe have to display hakarat hatov towards the inanimate river and earth? Certainly the river and the earth did not "benefit" from Moshe's gratitude. But Moshe himself benefited. When we display gratitude to another, we are recognising that we are not perfect and that we need the assistance of others. This process of verbalising our gratitude can help to ingrain within us a feeling of humility. Also, it can actually engender a feeling of relief when we acknowledge and recognise that we need the help of others, and we are not solely responsible for everything.

The message 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 may find it difficult to have hakarat hatov and 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. Our egos may not appreciate such reminders. To soften the blow, it might help us to remember the following:

- 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 for which he is most renowned. Humility and hakarat hatov go hand-in-hand. They both stem from a middah of hod (submission). It is no surprise that we learn the importance of gratitude from the humblest of Jewish leaders. Humility is a fundamental and esteemed character trait that starts with gratitude and can lead to greatness.

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. Remind ourselves of the extent that Moshe went to show hakarat hatov to inanimate objects.
3. Make an extra effort to express gratitude to each person that helped us in any way.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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