

PARSHAS KI SEITZEI 5777

This week's parsha contains countless mitzvos and countless fundamentals of the Torah.

There is one mitzvah that we speak about numerous times during the year because it is both essential and easily forgotten. Unless we review it constantly, we fall prey to forgetting the message in our everyday lives.

Failure in Moral Obligations

The Torah says a Moavi and Ammoni convert may not marry into the Jewish community, even after many generations. We are talking about fully committed converts to Judaism. They have become Jewish. But the males cannot marry a regular Jewish woman. Why? What did they do? They should have run out to greet the Jews with bread and water when they came from the desert. And Moav did something worse. They hired Billom to curse the Jews. Even though the curse had no effect and Hashem protected Klal Yisroel, the fact that these two nations failed in their moral obligations, Klal Yisroel are commanded not to extend to them any social accommodation. Separate yourselves from them and their families.

Unbelievable.

But, a convert from Egypt is accepted into the regular community after the 3rd generation. Why? Because the Egyptians were our hosts in exile.

What is the message of these mitzvos? The Rambam in Moreh Hanevuchim notes that we need to appreciate the ancestry of the nations of Ammon and Moav who were descendants of Lot—the nephew and brother-in-law of Avrohom Ovinu. Horon, Avrohom's brother, was Lot's father and Soroh Imeinu's father.

At the test of faith at the kivshon ho'aish in Ur Kasdim, Avrohom was steadfast—he wasn't going to waiver from his beliefs, regardless of the consequences. Horon was different. He was going to follow the winner. If Avrohom survived, he would follow Avrohom. If Avrohom died, he would follow Nimrod. Avrohom was thrown into the fiery furnace and was miraculously saved. When they came to Horon, he says he is with Avrohom, was thrown into the fire and died. No miracle was performed for him.

Avrohom was saved because he was prepared to be moser nefesh for the truth. His willingness to sacrifice everything for the truth made him worthy of being saved. Horon wasn't seeking the truth. He was picking a winner of a contest. So he is allowed to die.

Lot ultimately benefited greatly from being in Avrohom Ovinu's household, even though it was difficult at the beginning. But Lot was an opportunist. He sees that Avrohom has no children and views himself as the only heir of Avrohom's estate and justifies cheating and stealing. He notices Sdom is a very fertile land and wants to settle there, even though the Torah testifies that

the inhabitants of Sdom were very evil people. Lot doesn't care. He sees an opportunity for financial gain and he goes for it. But when Hashem is destroying Sdom, He remembers Avrohom and allows the zechus of Avrohom to save Lot from destruction. Then Lot commits incest with his daughters to produce Ammon and Moav.

In the end, these nations owe their entire existence to Avrohom Ovinu. Because of this association with Avrohom Ovinu, they received a portion of land in Ever HaYarden which Klal Yisroel cannot take away. They have a tremendous debt of gratitude as a nation to Avrohom Ovinu. So when his descendants came for bread and water, there was a powerful moral obligation to extend themselves for them. Instead, Moav tried to curse them.

The Most Fundamental Middoh

The Rambam says the Torah is trying to teach us the middoh of hakoras hatov. This story of Klal Yisroel leaving Egypt is occurring 440 years after Lot was saved by Avrohom. Nevertheless, they were expected to show hakoras hatov to Avrohom Ovinu's descendants and help Klal Yisroel in the midbor. Because they didn't have this middoh of hakoras hatov Hashem considers them such low-lives that for all time they are not allowed to marry into the normal Jewish community. Even if you are moser nefesh to come to Judaism and accept all the mitzvos, you can become Jewish, but you are not allowed to integrate into regular Jewish society and be in a position to corrupt Klal Yisroel's national character.

The fundamental middoh of all middos is hakoras hatov. And Hashem is telling us that if someone is lacking in this fundamental middoh, he cannot join the social fabric of Klal Yisroel. This wasn't a favor that they got yesterday or last week. It happened 440 years ago! But it doesn't matter. Their ancestors saved our ancestors from extinction and without them we wouldn't exist. By not showing hakoras hatov for that, you are a revolting person who lacks basic middos.

The Rambam tells us we have to stop and think about how important this middoh is.

Klal Yisroel are held to the same standard. Just imagine—the Torah warns us not to adopt the practices of Egypt. It was a decadent and morally deprived culture which glorified the most base and animalistic behaviors imaginable. They exhibited such immense cruelty to Klal Yisroel for 83 years. The Egyptians have a package of middos that we really don't want in our Torah culture! So we should reject any Egyptian convert as well. But we can't. Why? Because we have to have hakoras hatov to the Egyptians for hosting us during the times of famine.

Now let's understand this a little better: Before the Egyptians hosted Klal Yisroel, Yosef saved Egypt from complete disaster by warning them and preparing them for the coming seven years of hunger. So Pharaoh was only reciprocating by inviting Yosef's

family to stay in Egypt. Nevertheless, that basic token gesture of allowing Klal Yisroel to stay in Egypt and flourish there for 127 years obligated us with a debt of gratitude that knows almost no limit. So even if the Egyptians are corrupt and decadent, we have to somehow work around it and accommodate them. Because can we can't ruin our own middos and suppress our hakoras hatov. If we don't show our hakoras hatov to Egypt, then we've compromised our own middos.

The Importance of Developing Middos Tovos

We learn a couple of important lessons from these mitzvos. The role of developing middos tovos within us take a very high priority in Yiddishkeit. It lies at the bedrock of Torah and what it means to be Jewish.

The Rambam writes in his peirush to the Mishnayos in Sanhedrin that the ultimate punishment for denying the various beliefs of Yiddishkeit is depriving one of his olom habboh. But there are other ways one can lose his olom habboh even though these avieros don't seem to be so severe: hamalbin pnei chaveiro berabim, mechaneh shem lechaveiro, etc. These are breakdowns in interpersonal relationships. The Rambam gives an interesting explanation. Someone who has low middos loses his olom habboh, not because of the severity of the aveiroh, but because someone with such deficient character just doesn't belong in a realm that is close to Hashem.

The Rambam in Hilchos Teshuvah describes what it is to deserve olom habboh. Having middos tovos is the basic foundation without which you don't even get started. A Jew is obligated to develop his character. It's not a middas chassidus, it's not something extra. It's the bedrock of Yiddishkeit. Within those middos tovos, the most fundamental one is hakoras hatov.

The Chovos Halevovos goes further. If you don't feel that debt of gratitude to another human being who did something to benefit you, then you can't really have a proper relationship with Hashem either. The nature of our relationship with Hashem is that we recognize that Hashem created us, considers us, nurtures us, takes care of our every need, and therefore we owe Him everything. The obligation of kibbud ov vo'eim for our parents exists regardless of how well they treated us and how they raised us. Without them we wouldn't exist. There is no limit to the sense of gratitude we should have for our parents. Because of that, the most fundamental relationships we have in our lives are based on the idea of hakoras hatov. If you received benefit from someone, you own them your gratitude. If you don't feel indebted to them, then you don't understand what Torah is all about.

Ammon and Moav owed their entire existence to Avrohom Ovinu. When they looked at themselves and their history, they had to realize where they came from and who they were named after. They knew their origin story and what they owed to Avrohom Ovinu. And they knew who Klal Yisroel were, but they didn't care. It happened 440 years ago.

But this is not how the Torah looks at it. There is no limit to

the amount of hakoras hatov one needs to feel. If you have an entire nation where all the males showed a gross lack of hakoras hatov, we have to watch out and set up barriers to not let that hash'choso of middos seep into our society.

When we look at ourselves vis-à-vis Egypt, it doesn't matter how cruel and how vicious they were at a later point. They were gracious to us for the first 127 years of our exile and that created an eternal debt of gratitude.

Devastating Consequences

There is an incredible midrash which explains the hidden story behind Kriyas Yam Suf and all the names associated with that event. Klal Yisroel were heading south from the main civilization of Egypt, reaching the eastern coast of the Gulf of Suez and then travelled on to the western coast. This is when Pharaoh started to get really nervous and decided to risk everything he had left to pursue Klal Yisroel. Why? Because the truth was that all the riches amassed by Yosef during the years of famine weren't stored in Egypt proper, but rather were shipped to the southern region guarded by a special military camp of armed forces called Migdol, next to the god of money called Ba'al Tzefone.

When Klal Yisroel got close to this camp on the way to Yam Suf, after they had cleaned out Egypt, Pharaoh got scared that Klal Yisroel was after the money. He came charging down. Then Klal Yisroel came in to Yam Suf. When they emerged all the Egyptians were dead and all the treasures of Yosef sitting in the storehouses right were in front of them with no one to guard them. According to this Yalkut, this was the bizas hayam which surpassed the what they had taken from Egypt.

There was a deep lesson in all this. Pharaoh was only able to start the oppressive slavery by forgetting what Yosef had done for the country and actively renouncing the debt of hakoras hatov he should have felt. The ultimate punishment Hashem delivered for this lack of gratitude was to take away all that goodness that Yosef had left for Egypt. Hakoras Hatov is the bedrock of Torah and there are very serious consequences for showing a lack of hakoras hatov—Hashem takes away all the goodness you are taking for granted.

Ammon and Moav were promised a portion in Eiver Hayarden because they were Lot's descendants. This was due to the zechus of Avrohom Ovinu. Klal Yisroel were not allowed to conquer it and take it away from them. But they showed a lack of hakoras hatov to Avrohom Ovinu. So Hashem arranged that Sichon and Og would conquer some of that territory and then Klal Yisroel could take it. If you don't have the proper hakoras hatov, you end up losing what you received. It was devastating for Ammon and Moav and it was devastating for Pharaoh.

The feeling of hakoras hatov is a critical component of the Torah that knows no limits, and the consequences of showing a lack of hakoras hatov can lead to devastating consequences.