

This parsha—just as the last one—has many aspects to it and there is a question of which point to focus on. I chose to discuss the issur of allowing Ammonim and Moavim to integrate into Klal Yisroel—even though I may have discussed it in previous years—because the lesson to take from this topic is vital and needs to be reviewed as often as possible.

Even if members of these nations convert and becomes Jews, they can never marry into the families of Klal Yisroel. Why? Because not only did they fail to offer aid and support when we were in the Wilderness, but they did the opposite—they hired Bilaam in an attempt to destroy the Jewish People. This is unforgivable. We are commanded not to seek their peace and welfare for all of human history forever.

This is very extreme treatment.

Then, Hashem commands us not to reject converts from Eisov or Mitzrayim. Eisov is your brother and Mitzrayim hosted you in golus. When three generations pass since converting, they may intermarry with Klal Yisroel.

What principle stands behind these mitzvos?

Those who learned Sefer Shoftim know about Eglon melech Moav. Chazal praise him to the sky—his descendant Rus is destined to become the mother of the line of Moshiach! But if he himself would have converted, he (and his male line of descendants) would have been rejected from joining the family of Klal Yisroel.

Why? Because the posuk says Moav lacked the middoh of hakoras hatov.

Let us try to understand to what extent Hashem expects people to develop the middoh of hakoras hatov. Amon and Moav were born to Lot and his daughters in the zechus of Avrohom Ovinu right before the birth of Yitzchak. This took place 400 years before Klal Yisroel left Egypt. The nations of Amon and Moav are expected to remember the zechus by which they were born and have a sense of hakoras hatov to Avrohom's descendants 440 years later. For not remembering and expressing that hakoras hatov, they are branded as ingrates for all time! They are considered morally repugnant and Klal Yisroel is to have nothing to do with them!

Imagine you were told that your ancestors owed their lives to someone 440 years ago and as a result, you owe a debt of gratitude to that person's descendants forever and ever.

The debt of hakoras hatov goes in the other direction as well—we are commanded to not despise the Egyptian convert and welcome him. This is because they granted us refuge in golus and we grew and prospered in their land. But let's understand what kind of host Egypt was! They enslaved us and tried to exterminate us for the last 83 years of that golus! The only reason they accepted Yaakov's family with open arms in the beginning was because of all Yosef did for Egypt. He spared their country from the ravages of famine and gathered all the wealth of the ancient world into their treasury! It wasn't out of some selfless, altruistic motive. But we have to remember the benefit we received nonetheless.

The Rambam in Moreh Nevuchim tells us that in order to develop the proper sensitivity to the middoh of hakoras hatov, we need to contemplate these mitzvos and appreciate what they demand from those who receive benefit from others—despite any ill-treatment we

also received from them.

Egypt was viciously cruel to us for 83 years. But the benefit we received for the first 127 years created an eternal debt of gratitude. Moshe was restricted from carrying out the first three makkos—he could not strike the Nile or the sand. Why? Because he received benefit from these creations and it would betray his debt of hakoras hatov if he were to inflict damage to them. Even though they are inanimate and had no choice in the matter, Moshe still needed to show gratitude.

Rabbeinu Bachaye in Chovos Halevovos states that the middoh of hakoras hatov is fundamental to being a religious person. If a person doesn't understand the debt of gratitude he has towards someone from whom he receives benefit, then he can't understand the proper relationship he must have for Hashem.

Hakoras hatov isn't limited to the individual you received benefit from. It extends to all his descendants and for all time in the future. Lacking this middoh makes you fit to be rejected and remain an outcast.

This is the reverse of another set of mitzvos. We are not allowed to take revenge or even to bear a grudge. We cannot retaliate in any way when someone wrongs us, nor are we allowed to harbor hidden hateful feelings in our heart towards that person. We are commanded to verbally express our grievances with that person, give him rebuke, and then seek reconciliation. We can't nurse our negative feelings towards him indefinitely. We can't assert our ego and try to snub him and refuse to have anything to do with him. Why?

There are two ways of viewing the world and the things that happen to us. One way is to see things happening spontaneously without any connection or objective. The other is to understand that everything that happens is a result of Hashem's hashgocho protis and His ultimate plan for us. The Rambam writes that if people are in a building when it collapses and people are killed, or a ship drowns at sea, it is because Hashem wanted those people in that building at that particular time or on that ship. Nothing happens in this world without Hashem's will and guidance. It is based on many complicated cheshbonos.

The Ramban gives us an important insight about the way Hashem's hashgocho works, from Yosef's mission to meet with his brothers. Yosef gets lost along the way—he knows he won't be greeted with kindness if he reaches them. He has every reason to give up and return to the safety of his father. But Hashem keeps sending people, malochim, to steer him in the proper direction because He has a bigger plan for Yosef. Hashem knows that Yosef's commitment to fulfilling his chiyuv of kibbud av is greater than his fear of his brothers' jealousy. So Yosef persists in looking for them and ultimately winds up being sold as a slave in Egypt.

The Ramban's phrase is that Hashem's decrees are true and will always prevail. People's efforts to achieve their own objectives are ultimately in vain. This means Hashem uses the free-will and petty drives of human beings to carry out His plans. At the end of the whole drama of Yosef and his brothers when Yaakov dies, the brothers are scared for their lives—they assume Yosef will finally take revenge. Yosef informs them that all their plots and schemes against him were merely tools in the hands of Hashem to bring about golus Mitzrayim in the most optimal way. He had a nevuah that he will rule over the brothers and there was nothing they could do to thwart that outcome. Hashem used their bad middos to get him to Egypt. It was going to happen anyway—so why should I resent it? On the other hand, Hashem tested you and you

failed the nisayon by giving in to your jealousy to plot against me. But that is between you and Hashem. It has nothing to do with me.

So the Rambam writes—if you see something happening to you, accept it and look inwardly—because it comes from Hashem. Don't waste your energy getting angry and being resentful of the person who did it—he is just a tool of Hashem. It would have happened anyway if this person used his free will differently. Getting personally upset at the person shows you really think this person controlled what happened to you and not Hashem. You need to work on your emunah and bitachon—there is no place for taking revenge.

The flipside is that when someone does something that benefits you, you still owe them a debt of gratitude—even though they were also a tool in Hashem's hands. We see this from Moshe Rabbeinu's inability to harm the Nile and the sand—even though they exercised no bechiroh whatsoever in their beneficial role. It doesn't matter. The middoh of hakoras hatov requires accepting the debt of gratitude for any form of benefit. It is a very interesting contrast with the command not to bear a grudge.

The Rambam derives from these mitzvos that if you lack middos tovos we don't want you mixing with Klal Yisroel. It is a central aspect of your yiddishkeit.

In the hakdomo to Perek Chelek, the Rambam says someone who doesn't believe in the 13 ikkorim does not enter olam habboh and is cut off from the Jewish community. He continues there are other people who lose their olam habboh for committing aveiros that one wouldn't think are so severe. They are aveiros which show a severe lack in Bein Odom Lechavero—being insensitive to other people's feelings. Why is the consequence losing one's olam habboh? The Rambam explains that someone who is severely lacking in middos tovos has a nefesh garuoh—a very low-level neshomo. Such a person simply doesn't belong in olam habboh. The extent of one's middos tovos determines the quality of one's neshomo and one's ability to connect

to Hashem in olam habboh.

The Rambam says without middos tovos, you don't get your foot in the door. The central component of middos tovos is hakoras hatov. Amon and Moav can't mix with Klal Yisroel because they lack this quality.

The Rambam writes that from the mitzvah to accept geirim from Eisov we see the Torah's value in not neglecting relatives from our care and concern. Even Eisov—an evil person who had no great affection for his brother Yaakov—must still be included. He is your brother—even 3500 years later. It goes to show the extent we are commanded to show concern for relatives.

These middos are fundamental to every part of Torah.

The Rambam tells us that the issur of not abandoning one's relative should be understood very broadly. If it extends to Eisov, then surely it should be extended to every single Jew. We are all part of one family and we need to care about each and every Jew as a brother.

The idea of feeling and caring about another Jew is built into this parsha—you have to worry about those who are close to you.

There is a non-Jewish concept of chessed—traveling thousands of miles to some primitive jungle tribe somewhere in Africa and trying to save children from starvation and disease. But what about the homeless person living on the street two miles away?

In Yiddishkeit, there is a hierarchy of chessed. Your first priority is to your immediate family—and then you expand outward to your city and your country. Your first priority is to those who are closest to you. You can never forget that your relative is the foremost of your concern.

The Torah is telling us the importance of middos tovos and how it needs to affect us generations later. It begins with the fact that hakoras hatov is an essential middoh for fulfilling the Torah. This is why Ammonim and Moavim cannot be accepted into Klal Yisroel, and why we must be welcoming to Mitzri and Adomi geirim.