

As we approach the Yom HaDin we must focus on many aspects of our behavior. There are countless aspects to Parshas Ki Seitzei, but one of the most important statements about middos tovos is in this week's parsha.

The Rambam in Hilchos Deos says the mitzvah to have good middos comes from the mitzvah of 'v'holachto b'drochov'. It means to imitate Hashem's middos. Hashem has different middos. We are obligated to change ourselves and mold ourselves around those middos. This is what the Torah refers to as the "derech Hashem". The Rambam knows this from the verse in Bereishis which mentions the term "derech Hashem" and then goes on to refer to tzedoko and mishpot – which are middos tovos.

כי ידעתי למען אשר יצוה את בניו ואת ביתו אחריו ושמו דרך ה' לעשות צדקה ומשפט:

The Rambam in Hilchos Teshuvah says the greatest reward for the tzaddikim is the reward of olom habboh – it is forever.

א הטובה הצפונה לצדיקים היא תני העולם הבא והיא התיים שאין מות עמהן והטובה שאין עמה רעה. הוא שכתוב בתורה 'למען ייטב לך והארכת ימים'. מפי השמועה למדו למען ייטב לך לעולם שכלו טוב והארכת ימים לעולם שכלו ארך. וזה הוא העולם הבא.

In the beginning of Perek 9 he continues: "since it is known that the reward for mitzvos which is earned by observing the "derech Hashem is olom habboh..."

א מאחר שנודע שמתן שכלן של מצות והטובה שנתנה לה אם שמרנו דרך ה' הכתוב בתורה היא תני העולם הבא שאומר 'למען ייטב לך והארכת ימים'.

The Rambam is telling us an incredible thing. After everything that will be said about how to merit olom habboh, it all depends on one precondition: having middos tovos.

The Rambam continues to ask: why does the Torah only mention reward in this world and not in the next if it is not the real reward? He answers that the source of all life is the Torah. We will only merit olom habboh with limud haTorah. All the reward promised in this world is only to make it easier to keep and learn Torah without any distractions.

אלא כך הוא הכרע כל הדברים. הקדוש ברוך הוא נתן לנו תורה זו עץ חיים היא. וכל העושה כל הכתוב בה ויודעו דעה גמורה נכונה זוכה בה לחיי העולם הבא. ולפי גזל מעשיו ורב חכמתו הוא זוכה. והבטיחנו בתורה שאם נעשה אותה בשמחה ובטובת נפש ונהגה בתקמתה תמיד שישיר ממנו כל הדברים המונעים אותנו מלעשותה כגון חלי ומלחמה ורעב וכיוצא בהן. וישפיע לנו כל הטובות המתזקקות את ידנו לעשות התורה כגון שבע ושלוש ורבי כסף וזהב. כדי שלא נעסק כל ימינו בדברים שהגוף צריך להן אלא נשב פנויים ללמד בתקנה ולעשות המצוה כדי שנתנה לחיי העולם הבא.

But the prerequisite for all of it is middos tovos.

The Rambam in Peirush Hamishayos to Perek Chelek is bothered by the Mishna which lists the aveiros which can cause one to lose one's olom habboh. Chazal have included aveiros like embarrassing people in public and giving them derogatory nicknames, etc. These are mitzvos of bein odom lechaveiro which are seemingly not so severe as to cause one to lose one's olom habboh! He answers that this is not a punishment. If you don't have middos tovos, then you simply don't belong in olom habboh. Your neshomo is not fitting for such a lofty place.

The verse in this week's parsha says Ammon and Moav are not

allowed to marry into Klal Yisroel because they didn't offer to help Klal Yisroel with food and drink when they came from the desert. They did the opposite – they hired Bilaam to curse us and destroy us. The commentaries explain that this behavior revealed their lack of hakoras hatov for all the kindness our ancestor Avrohom did to their ancestor Lot. A sense of gratitude should have been so ingrained in them that they should have come running to help Klal Yisroel in the desert. Because of this lack of gratitude, they are a repulsive people and Klal Yisroel may have nothing to do with them.

Someone asked me: does this imply that hakoras hatov is one of the 7 mitzvos of Bnei Noach? If not, why is the lack of this middoh so repulsive? The answer is that certainly there may be a mitzvah of middos tovos. But it goes beyond the mitzvah. As the Rambam wrote in Peirush Hamishnayos, it reflects the essence of the human being.

Hakoras hatov is a foundation of the entire Torah. The Chovos Halevovos writes that someone who lacks hakoras hatov to Hashem has no reason to keep Torah and mitzvos because he doesn't have a real relationship with Hashem. Hashem gives us everything we have!

In the Ramban's hasagos to the Rambam's first mitzvas assei of Anochi Hashem, he explains why yetziyas mitzrayim is so central to all of Yiddishkeit. It is because we need to establish our relationship with Hashem through that event which gave us everything we have. At yetziyas mitzrayim we were shown how much Hashem cares for us and protects us – He uplifted us and made us His chosen nation. So in return, we owe Hashem an overwhelming sense of hakoras hatov to keep His mitzvos. It is the foundation of everything.

The Rambam derives from this mitzvah how far the obligation to have hakoras hatov goes. Just think about what was expected of Ammon and Moav. Way, way back in history, the verse says explicitly that Lot would have been destroyed along with Sdom if not for the merit of Avrohom. As a result of being pulled out of Sdom, the conditions were set up for Ammon and Moav to be born. If you stop and make the calculation, these two nations were supposed to appreciate this fact 440 years later! They were expected to let us go through their land and be hospitable to us. Because of their low national character, we can have nothing to do with them. It is incredible.

It isn't because middos tovos are one of the 7 mitzvos of Bnei Noach. It may be and it may not be. But we don't want this kind of character infiltrating the nation of Klal Yisroel. If this is the natural culture of the males in their society, then they must be shunned, even after they convert and become fully observant.

Middos tovos aren't just a bonus. The lack of middos tovos prevents you from entering olom habboh – not because of the severity of the sin per se. It is because your neshomo is so low that you don't belong there.

The next halacha in this parsha is the obligation to allow converts from Egypt to marry into Klal Yisroel after three generations. Why? The Rambam says something even more incredible. We have to have hakoras hatov for them because their ancestors were generous and allowed Yaakov and his family to live in Goshen. Pharaoh and the Egyptians rolled out the red carpet for them at the beginning. But this is very hard to understand. In our last 83 years in Egypt, Klal Yisroel were treated horribly! We were enslaved and tortured and our babies were murdered! Apparently, these are horrible people and we see Hashem punished them quite harshly for being so evil. Nevertheless,

we have to keep in mind our first 127 years in Egypt when they treated us well. They took care of us and supported us for all those years. Egypt is a mixed bag. Hashem punished them quite severely for their evil, but we have to remember the good times they gave us and show hakoras hatov.

Moshe Rabbeinu was not able to bring a makkoh on the Nile or on the sand, because these things helped Moshe Rabbeinu when he needed them. But these are inanimate objects! It shows how much sensitivity a person has to show for every good thing he receives.

Middos are not a side aspect of the Torah. They are central. How central? The Rambam says it is a prerequisite for olom habboch. With bad middos, you can't marry into Klal Yisroel.

The other halacha in this verse teaches us not to reject the Edomite convert. He also must be allowed to marry into Klal Yisroel after three generations. Even though Eisov, their ancestor, tried to kill Yaakov! Still, he was Yaakov Ovinu's full brother (not a half-brother like Yishmoel) and this itself creates an obligation to accept Edomite converts and

make them feel welcome.

The Rambam says this teaches us a valuable lesson even for today. No matter how badly a relative in your family might have treated you in the past, you have no right to abandon them in times of need and not show them compassion. We have a clear obligation to take care of relatives. If it is a separate mitzvah in the Torah to take care of Eisov because he was Yaakov's brother, so all the more so we are obligated to care of our own relatives.

People are under a bad misconception that middos development is only for tzaddikim, and the average Jew can basically ignore the topic and be fine. The Rambam is telling us that middos are fundamental to Yiddishkeit. Bad middos cannot be allowed to enter our national culture. It is the backbone of the whole Torah.

There are many aspects of this parsha one can speak about. But as we approach the Yomim Noraim, we cannot overlook the essential need to look at ourselves and work on our middos.