

GRATITUDE TO A PLANT

by Shlomo Katz

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Vaera

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Today's Learning:

Shabbat 11:6-12:1

Orach Chaim 219:3-5

Daf Yomi (Bavli): Yevamot 39

Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Sotah 1

In this week's parashah we read of the first seven of the Ten Plagues. Rashi writes that Aharon, not Moshe, initiated the plagues of blood and lice because Moshe did not want to hit the Nile or the sand. Moshe felt a debt of gratitude to the river and the sand. The Nile had saved him when he was an infant in a basket and the sand had saved him when he buried the Egyptian that he killed.

R' Yaakov Yitzchak Halevi Ruderman z"l (founder of Yeshiva Ner Israel in Baltimore and its rosh yeshiva from 1933 to 1987) notes the lesson that we are to take from this: hakarat hatov/recognizing good that is done for us is not merely an obligation that we owe to other people. One must feel hakarat hatov toward any animal, plant or inanimate object from which one derives benefit.

R' Ruderman continues: we see this trait reflected in the Talmud commentary Shitah Mekubetzet (to

Bava Kamma 92b) where it is recorded that R' Yitzchak Alfasi (Morocco; 1013-1103) refused to judge a case involving the bathhouse where he bathed. Since he owed a debt of gratitude to that bathhouse, he did not want to run the risk of slighting it while determining its fate.

Why must one feel gratitude even to a bathhouse? Because the ability to appreciate kindness that one receives is one of the foundations of serving Hashem. The midrash says, "If one denies his friend's kindness, he will inevitably deny Hashem's kindness." Indeed, the very first sin that mankind did involved denying an act of kindness. This occurred when Adam defended his eating from the Tree of Knowledge with the words (3:12): "The woman whom You gave to be with me - she gave me of the tree, and I ate." Instead of recognizing that Hashem had performed a kindness for Adam by creating Chavah, Adam instead blamed Hashem for his own sin. (Sichot Halevi)

"Elokim spoke to Moshe and said to him, 'I am Hashem. I appeared to Avraham, to Yitzchak and to Yaakov . . . , but with My Name Hashem I did not make Myself known to them . . . I established My covenant with them . . . But also I have heard the groan of Bnei Yisrael whom Egypt enslaves . . . Therefore, say to Bnei Yisrael, 'I am Hashem'.'" (6:2-6)

There is a disagreement between the twelfth century sages Rambam and Ra'avad (in Hilchot Teshuvah ch. 6) regarding the answer to the following question: if Hashem decreed that Avraham's descendants would be exiled and enslaved, why were the Egyptians punished for enslaving them? Rambam answers that Hashem did not say in what country Bnei Yisrael would be enslaved. The Egyptians so-to-speak volunteered to enslave Bnei Yisrael, and for that they were punished. Ra'avad disagrees; he writes that the Egyptians were punished for treating their slaves more harshly than necessary.

R' Gavriel Ze'ev Margolis z"l explains Rambam's and Ra'avad's disagreement as follows: The gemara (Nedarim 36b, and Rabbenu Nissim there) teaches that if a person (Reuven) says, "Let whomever wants come and separate terumah from my produce," a volunteer who comes and separates terumah (Shimon) would not be considered to be an agent of the produce-owner (Reuven). Accordingly, even if Reuven had previously undertaken a vow not to derive any benefit from this Shimon, Shimon would be permitted to separate terumah on Reuven's behalf, since Shimon would be acting on his own and not technically acting for Reuven.

On the other hand, if Reuven said, "Let whomever hears me come and separate terumah from my produce," a volunteer who comes and separates terumah is considered to be Reuven's agent. Therefore, if Reuven had previously undertaken a vow not to derive any benefit from Shimon, Shimon would not be permitted to separate terumah on Reuven's behalf.

Rambam writes elsewhere that there is no contradiction between our having free-will and Hashem's knowing the future because His knowledge is different from our knowledge in a way that we cannot comprehend. Somehow, the fact that He knows that a certain event will happen and a certain

person will be involved does not force that person to play that role. Rather, every person has free-will.

Thus, continues R' Margolis, when Hashem decreed that Bnei Yisrael would be enslaved, His knowledge that the enslavement would take place in Egypt did not force the Egyptians to enslave Bnei Yisrael. It was as if Hashem had said, "Let whomever wants come and enslave Bnei Yisrael," in which case the person who responds is not deemed to be an agent. It follows, then, that the Egyptians who did respond were deserving of punishment.

Ra'avad on the other hand, contends that Hashem's omniscience somehow limits man's free-will. Thus, when Hashem decreed that Bnei Yisrael would be enslaved in Egypt, He effectively appointed the Egyptians as agents to fulfill His will. It was as if He said, "Let whomever hears come and enslave Bnei Yisrael," in which case the one who responded was deemed to be an agent. Therefore, since the Egyptians were merely His agents, they would not have been deserving of punishment if not for the fact that they treated their slaves too harshly. (Torat Gavriel to Shmot 1:1)

R' Margolis writes that in light of Ra'avad's view that the Egyptians were punished only because they enslaved Bnei Yisrael too harshly, the verses quoted above can be understood as follows: When Moshe first spoke to Pharaoh, Pharaoh responded by worsening Bnei Yisrael's working conditions, as described near the end of last week's parashah. That parashah then ends with Moshe questioning why Hashem allowed this to happen.

Our parashah opens with Hashem's answer to Moshe's question: "Elokim (the Attribute of Justice) spoke to Moshe: 'I am Hashem' (the Attribute of Mercy)." My harsh judgment and My mercy are one and the same; in order to redeem Bnei Yisrael before the end of the 400 years that the exile was supposed to last, I had to increase the harshness of the exile."

That Hashem's harsh justice can at the same time be merciful is something that Hashem never revealed to the Patriarchs, for they could withstand justice alone. "With My Name Hashem I did not make Myself known to them." And, why did Hashem ignore Bnei Yisrael's suffering until now? Because, "I established My covenant with them" - it was My decree in My covenant with Avraham that they would be enslaved.

But now, "I have heard the groan of Bnei Yisrael whom Egypt enslaves" more harshly than I had decreed. "Therefore, say to Bnei Yisrael, 'I am Hashem'," the merciful G-d who will redeem them and punish their oppressors. (Torat Gavriel to Shmot 6:2)

"Moshe spoke before Hashem, saying, 'Behold, Bnei Yisrael have not listened to me, so how will Pharaoh listen to me?'"

(6:12)

Many commentaries observe that Moshe's argument seems illogical. The Torah tells us why Bnei

Yisrael did not listen; it was, in the words of verse 6:9, "because of shortness of breath and hard work." However, this reason did not apply to Pharaoh, so maybe he would listen!

R' Chaim Elazary z"l (see page 4) answers that Moshe's argument was as follows: No one can be rescued from exile unless he feels the exile and wants to be redeemed from it. If Pharaoh sees that Bnei Yisrael are satisfied with their present situation, why should he listen to me and let them go? (Netivei Chaim II p. 91)

Rabbis of the New World

The following are biographical notes on two of the sages who appear in this week's issue:

R' Gavriel Ze'ev Wolf (Velvel) Margolis z"l was born in Vilna on 27 Cheshvan 5608/1847, the son of the scholar and kabbalist R' Yechiel Yitzchak Margolis. From age 14 to age 17, young Velvel studied under R' Yaakov Brit (1797-1883), one of the teachers of the Chafetz Chaim. In the letter of semichah/ordination that R' Brit gave R' Velvel in 1869, the teacher wrote: "He became great and greater still, not like the greatness of students who succeed in their studies after five years - he, in a short time, passed his friends; they chased him but could not catch him, because his belly was filled with Talmud and halachah." In 1864, the young R' Margolis married the daughter of another teacher of the Chafetz Chaim, the famed tzaddik R' Nachumke of Horodna (Grodno).

Beginning in 1876, R' Margolis served as rabbi in several Lithuanian towns. In 1880, after the death of his father-in-law, he settled in Grodno where he taught for 27 years. In 1907, he was brought to Boston, Massachusetts as its Chief Rabbi. In 1912, R' Margolis moved to Manhattan's Lower East Side as rabbi of the Adas Yisrael congregation. He died on 11 Elul 5695/1935.

R' Margolis' Torah commentary Torat Gavriel was published in the 1920's together with his commentaries on the haftarot and the five megillot. In the foreword to Torat Gavriel, R' Margolis mentions his plans to write a book on the state of American Jewry. (Sources: Torat Gavriel, Foreword; Otzar Ha'rabbanim No. 4305)

R' Chaim Moshe Reuven Elazary z"l was a student of the Slobodka Yeshiva, first in Europe and then in Chevron. He began his rabbinic career in the Bronx, N.Y., and also taught at a yeshiva in Brooklyn. After 1929, he succeeded his father-in-law, R' Ephraim Pelcovitz, as rabbi of Congregation Agudas Achim in Canton, Ohio. (The latter had been in Canton since 1914, and in 1929 moved to Bridgeport, Connecticut.)

In 1972, R' Elazary settled in Petach Tikva, and he died there on 7 Iyar 5744/ 1984. He left numerous published and unpublished works and articles, many of them exhibiting the influence of R' Nossan Zvi Finkel, the "Alter of Slobodka."

R' Elazary's brothers, R' Betzalel and R' Yisrael, were among those murdered by Palestinian Arabs in

the 1929 Chevron massacre. (Sources: Netivei Chaim; Shevilei Chaim, Otzar Ha'rabbanim No. 3061)

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The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ("lehagdil Torah u'leha'adirah"), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at Project Genesis start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the Hamaayan page. Text archives from 1990 through the present may be retrieved from <http://www.acoast.com/~sehc/hamaayan/>. Donations to HaMaayan are tax-deductible.
