

TWO PARADIGMS OF THANKFUL INDIVIDUALS

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 170, A Younger Child Marrying First. Good Shabbos!

Two Paradigms of Thankful Individuals

The Torah tells us that when Leah gave birth to her fourth son, Yehudah, she said "This time I will give thanks to G-d" [Bereishis 29:35]. The Medrash says that Leah "acquired for herself" the attribute of giving thanks, and that her descendants continued to emulate her attribute of thanksgiving.

Who were these descendants who carried on the practice of recognizing a favor (hakaras haTov)? The Medrash says that first there was Yehudah, who said, "She was more righteous than I" [Bereishis 38:26] and then there was David who said "Offer Praise to the L-rd, for He is Good" [Tehillim 107:1].

[Yehudah's remark related to the incident with his daughter-in-law, Tamar. Tamar was suspected of becoming pregnant improperly from someone outside the family, while in truth it was Yehudah who had relations with her. Until decreed by the Torah that only a dead husband's brother could perform levirate marriage, the father could as well, and thus her relationship with Yehudah was appropriate. When they were about to put her to death, Tamar presented the signet and cane which Yehudah had given to her, and Yehudah himself came forward and acknowledged that they were his, admitting that he was the one who made her pregnant.]

The fact that the Medrash cites King David as a classic example of offering thanks, appreciation to G-d, and practicing hakaras haTov is easily understood. However, Yehudah's announcement of his own guilt does not seem to be directly related to the attribute of offering thanksgiving.

The interpretation of the Medrash might be based on an insight from Rav Hutner. Rav Hutner points out that the Hebrew word for "admitting" and the Hebrew word for "giving thanks" are one and the same -- Hoda'ah. In Hebrew, we say, "I am Modeh that I owe you" (I admit) and we also say, "Modeh Ani lefanecha" (I give thanks before You).

There is a blessing in the Shmoneh Esrei called the Blessing of thanksgiving. The blessing begins

with the words "Modim anachnu lach". Rav Hutner says that the literal translation of these words is not "we thank You"; rather the literal translation is "we admit to You".

Rav Hutner explains that the reason why these two words are identical in Hebrew is because a person's ability to give thanks is based on his ability to admit that he is incomplete. If a person gives thanks to someone, it indicates that he is incomplete -- he needed the favors and kindness of someone else. This is why it is sometimes so difficult for us to say "thank you" -- because it is so difficult for us to admit that we were in need. The greater the gifts that we receive from someone, the more difficult it is to say "thank you", because a greater gift indicates our greater need.

It is sometimes very difficult to give thanks to parents because we need them so much. They have given us so much. It is sometimes very difficult to thank our spouses because we know that we are incomplete without them.

The word for thanks is the same as the word for admission, because in order to say thank you a person must have the ability to admit that he is less than perfect.

That being the case, the Medrash is very profound. The Medrash marshals two examples of hakaras haTov that stem from the very same source. Yehudah was big enough and honest enough to say "I made a mistake". The ability of a person to admit his fallibility enables the person to show the other type of hakaras haTov, as typified by the verse brought from King David -- "Offer praises to G-d, for He is Good."

Motherhood is More than Biology

This week's parsha repeats a situation which we previously encountered concerning Sarah and Hagar. When Rachel saw that she was unable to have children, she offered her handmaiden, Bilhah, to Yaakov: "Go to her and she will give birth on my knees, and I too will be built up through her" [Bereishis 30:3].

At first glance, this practice does not seem to make any sense. If one cannot have any children, as unfortunate as that may be, designating someone else to have children would not seem to fulfill that need. What then does the verse mean, "I too will be built up through her?" Why did Rachel feel that she would be more complete if her handmaiden would have her children for her? And why did Sarah feel that she too would be called "a mother in Israel" if Hagar would have a child for her?

The Sha'arei Orah, by Rav Meir Bergman, explains a very important insight: The Matriarchs Sarah and Rachel understood the meaning of "a mother in Israel". This concept of having someone else give birth to our child seems foreign to us only because we do not understand what it means.

The book of Shmuel [II 6:16-20] describes that upon the return of the Ark of the Covenant to Israel (from Phillistine captivity), King David danced in front of it. His wife, Michal, objected to King David's behavior. Michal felt that it was inappropriate for the King of Israel to dance wildly in the presence of the "women and maids". The Medrash says that King David responded and said that these women

are not maids (ama-hos), rather they are mothers (ema-hos). "Let my lot be cast with them."

The Medrash concludes that Michal was punished for saying this. She did not have a child until the day she died [Shmuel II 6:23]. She died during childbirth.

Rav Bergman says that this Medrash is telling us that Michal committed a tragic mistake. She perceived those Jewish mothers as merely maids. After all, they diaper babies, wash diapers and wipe runny noses. That is a job for maids. She used the term "maids" to describe Jewish mothers.

King Dovid responded that although it might be true that mothers have to do a lot of work that is "maid work," that work is part of a greater job -- that of being a mother. Being a mother entails not only the runny noses and the dirty diapers. Being a mother entails molding and shaping an individual, a child. That is not 'ama-hos', that is 'ema-hos'. Therefore, King David chastised Michal for denigrating the institution of motherhood. King David said, "I cast my lot with mothers" because raising a child is the noblest job that a woman can do.

Therefore, the Medrash says that Michal received a terrible punishment -- measure for measure [Midah K'neged Midah]. Michal died during childbirth. Michal gave birth to a baby, but she was not a full 'mother in Israel'. Being a mother does not only mean bearing a child. To be a mother means to raise a child. One who does not fully appreciate that, one who does not know the importance of raising a child will not merit being a full mother.

Rav Bergman says that this is what Rachel understood. Let Yaakov have the baby with Bilhah. Nevertheless, I too can be built up through her. Bilhah may biologically bring the baby into the world, but if Rachel is the one who nurtures and raises and inculcates that baby with love and with the sense of what it means to be a Jew then she really is "a mother in Israel".

Rachel was not mistaken. We are the ones who are mistaken. Rachel knew the meaning of being a mother -- sometimes it is not so much the act of giving birth to a baby, as it is raising and nurturing that Jewish soul.

Glossary

hakaras haTov-- recognizing a favor

Shmoneh Esrei -- 18 (blessings which constitute the basic prayer service)

Sources and Personalities

Rav Yitzchok Hutner (1907-1980) -- Rosh Yeshiva Mesivta Rav Chaim Berlin.

Rav Bergman -- Contemporary Israeli Rosh Yeshiva, Bnei Brak.

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