

SHOWING THE NILE THE GRATITUDE IT DESERVED

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Vaera

Showing The Nile The Gratitude It Deserved

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 533, Shin Shel Tefillin & Ohr Echad. Good Shabbos!

Parshas Vaera contains the bulk of the Ten Plagues, beginning with the plague of Blood and continuing up to the plague of Locusts. The plagues begin with G-d's command to Moshe: "Say to Aaron, 'Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt; over their rivers, over their canals, over their ponds, and over all their gatherings of water, and they shall become blood; there shall be blood in all the land of Egypt, and in the wood and in the stones.'" [Shemos 7:19]

Rashi on this pasuk [verse] teaches that it was Aaron, rather than Moshe, was commanded to initiate this plague because the Nile protected Moshe when he was thrown into it as an infant. Therefore, Aaron initiated the plague of Blood and the plague of Frogs (in which the Nile was also smitten). The Gemara comments on this: A person should not cast stones into the well from which he has drunk.

This is the principle of Hakaras HaTov [recognizing a favor]. We learn from here that Hakaras HaTov applies even when the doer of the favor is only doing what he is supposed to do anyway. The Nile merely floated the basket. That is the nature of water. It is a law of physics that something lighter than water floats on water. The Nile thus did not go out of its way to do anything special for Moshe. It just did what it has been doing since the beginning of time.

And yet, we still learn from here that there is an obligation of Hakaras HaTov. This dispels a common practice among people. It is the nature of people to say: "Why do I need to say 'Thank you'? Why do I need to have HaKaras HaTov? -- He had to do it anyway!"

Hakaras HaTov is not measured by the benefactor's efforts. It is measured by the impact on the recipient. When someone benefits from someone else -- whether the benefactor did or did not need to provide the benefit, he did or did not have to do it, whether it was or was not a bother for him, the

beneficiary has a responsibility to recognize that he owes a debt of gratitude. The proof is the Nile River. It merely did what water does and yet Moshe Rabbeinu felt a sense of Hakaras HaTov.

The Egyptians Remained Stubborn Against Their Better Judgment

The plague of Dever [Pestilence] wiped out all the livestock of Egypt. However, none of the cows belonging to Jews died. Nevertheless, Pharaoh's heart was hardened. The plague did not have the desired effect.

By the next plague, that of Boils (Shechin), the pasuk says, "It will become dust over the entire land of Egypt, and it shall become a boil blossoming forth blisters upon man and upon animal throughout the land of Egypt." [Shemos 9:9]. Indeed, this is exactly what happened: "They took soot of the furnace, and stood before Pharaoh and Moses threw it heavenward, and it became a boil and blisters erupting upon man and upon animal." [Shemos 9:10]. The question is "What animals? What beasts?" Weren't all the animals killed during the previous plague of Dever?

Rashi addresses this question. Rashi says that the plague of Dever only affected the animals that were out in the field. Those people "who feared the word of G-d" brought their animals inside and they were spared from the plague of Dever. Therefore, at this point in time, only the people "who feared G-d" still had animals.

But in the very next plague of Barad [Hail], Moshe again gave fair warning to the people: "Behold at this time tomorrow I shall rain a very heavy hail, such as there has never been in Egypt, from the day it was founded until now. And now send forth, gather in your livestock and everything you have in the field; all the people and animals that are found in the field and will not be gathered into the house - the hail shall descend upon them and they shall die." [Shemos 9:18-19]

The Torah continues: "Whoever among the servants of Pharaoh feared the word of Hashem made his servants and his livestock flee to the houses. And whoever did not take the word of G-d to heart - he left his servants and livestock in the field." [Shemos 9:20-21]

The question cries out to us: Anyone who still had animals at this stage of the cycle of plagues was already proven to be one who feared the word of G-d. How then, can the pasuk teach that there were people who DID NOT fear the word of G-d who kept their animals out in the field during the plague of Barad?

I saw a very interesting insight on this question from Rav Elya Meir Bloch. The Torah is revealing to us a basic truth in human nature. It is true that during the fifth plague of Dever there were Egyptians who "feared the word of G-d" and brought their animals into the barns before the plague began. But by this seventh plague of Barad some of these same people stubbornly proclaimed "No! I refuse to take in my animals." The difference is that in the warning before the plague of Dever, Moshe Rabbeinu did not challenge the Egyptians to bring the animals into their houses. He did not lay down the gauntlet and say (as he does by Barad) "You want your animals alive - bring them in; you want

your animals dead, leave them out!"

During the earlier plague, people with brains in their head took appropriate precautionary action. They were not fighting the yetzer hara [evil inclination] of standing up to Moshe's challenge. However, with barad, when they were threatened, as much as their logic and brains told them to take appropriate precautions, their emotions would not allow them to follow through. This is human nature. We resist orders and coercion even when deep down, we know that listening to these "orders" would be the wisest path to follow.

People are willing to lose life, limb, and property, just so they can avoid admitting "Hashem is the L-rd." (Hashem hu haElokim).

This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Vaera are provided below:

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