

A TALE OF TWO LESSONS IN HAKARAS HATOV

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Parshas Behaaloscha

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These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah CDs on the weekly portion: CD #860 Standing for a Sefer Torah. Good Shabbos!

The parsha contains the pasuk: "The people complained, speaking evil in the ears of Hashem, and Hashem heard and His wrath flared, and a fire of Hashem burned against them, and it consumed at the edge of the camp." [Bamidbar 11:1]. This Parsha contains the beginning of the unfortunate decline of the Jewish people during their sojourn in the Wilderness.

Rashi describes the "disconnect" between the people and the Almighty. They complained: "How much we have struggled on this journey! It has been three days that we have not rested from the suffering of the way!" G-d was angry at them: "I had intended it for your benefit, so that you would enter the Land immediately."

The Ramban takes note of a peculiar expression in the pasuk describing the complaints: "And the nation was 'k-misonenim' [they were LIKE complainers]". Strangely, the Torah does not state that the people complained. It states that they were "like complainers". What does that mean?

The Ramban explains that the people spoke out of hurt and pain. In other words, there was a certain degree of legitimacy to their whining. When people are in pain, it is natural for them to complain. If someone is in the hospital, he is laid up, he is in pain, and he sometimes utters things that he really should not be saying: "Why is G-d doing this to me? I do not deserve the suffering I am experiencing!" People get upset and when they are in pain, they complain. This is somewhat of a mitigating factor. They are only "LIKE" complainers. We cannot really throw the book at them. They were doing what comes naturally for those who are in pain.

If that's the case, asks the Ramban, why does Hashem get upset with them? The Ramban answers that they should have followed Him with a good spirit and attitude based on all the multitude of goodness and kindness He provided to them. When things are going so well and one has so much

good fortune, it is simply inappropriate to complain!

This is one of the great challenges of life. Most of us are extremely fortunate. We merit the uncontested bounty of the Almighty. Most of us have good health and families. We have so much good! But when things are not 100% right, we complain.

The Ramban is saying that this is not right. We should be looking at the "big picture" before we start complaining. The big picture is that there is a bounty of blessing we are enjoying despite the bumps in the road or the pot holes in the road or the ditch in the road that we occasionally get stuck in. We still should not complain because the sum total of our life is still overwhelmingly tilted towards the side of joy, gladness, and abundance of that which is good.

This is another example of a theme that is repeated so often in the Torah - the theme of "Hakaras haTov" [recognizing favors; showing gratitude].

The Apter Rav used to say that in every single parsha in the Torah, there is a hint (Remez) to the importance of Ahavas Yisrael [the mitzvah to love a fellow Jew]. The Apter Rav was once asked to point out the 'Remez' for Ahavas Yisrael in Parshas Balak. He quipped "That's simple. The name of the parsha - Balak - is an acronym for the words V'Ahavta L'Reacha Kamocha [You should love your neighbor as yourself]. The Chassidim questioned their master. "Rebbe, V'Ahavta begins with a Vov, while Balak begins with a Bais. Furthermore, Kamocha begins with a Kaf not a Kuf, which is the last letter of Balak!" The Apter Rav answered, "If you are so particular about the individual letters, you will never find Ahavas Yisrael!"

I use this story by way of introduction to note that in almost every parsha in the Torah, we may find some type of hint to the concept of Hakaras HaTov. We just mentioned one such 'remez'. However, there is a very novel interpretation given by the Moshav Zekeinim to an incident at the end of the parsha, which also highlights this concept of appreciating favors.

"Miriam and Aaron spoke (ill) about Moshe regarding the Cushite woman he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman." [Bamidbar 12:1] The Torah does not tell us explicitly what their problem was with this Cushite woman.

Rashi and most of the commentaries say that their problem was the fact that their brother Moshe neglected his wife. Because of his unique status of always being "on call" to speak to the Almighty, he could not live a normal life of husband and wife and had to physically separate from his wife, thereby neglecting her. Miriam and Aaron complained against Moshe, "Was it only with Moshe that Hashem spoke? Did He not speak with us as well?"

This is the classic, standard, interpretation of their complaint. The Moshav Zekeinim has a different interpretation. The Moshav Zekeinim says that their complaint was, on the contrary, that Moshe Rabbeinu should divorce this woman. Maybe, they reasoned, it was okay for Moshe to have married such a woman when he was a simple shepherd. However, now that he was the leader of the Jewish

people, he was due for an "upgrade". He deserved a wife more fitting of his station in life.

According to this approach, Moshe's response to his sibling was that to divorce this wife now would be a violation of the principle of "Hakaras HaTov". "This woman married me when I was a poor shepherd. I was a fugitive of justice, running away from the sword of Pharaoh and this woman married me and stuck with me. For me to dump her now that I have found a bit of success in my life would be a gross violation of the attribute of having appropriate gratitude (Hakaras haTov). Where is the loyalty toward the woman and the wife who was with me all these years?"

This interpretation, claims the Moshav Zekeinim, fits in well with the rebuke of the Almighty to the words of Miriam and Aaron: "B'chol Beisi Ne'eman Hu" [In all My House he is the most loyal one]. The trustworthiness of Moshe, his loyalty and faithfulness, extended not only to Hashem, it extended to his wife as well! He does not abandon the people around him.

The Common Denominator Between Miriam's Error and That Of The Spies

The beginning of next week's parsha contains the famous Rashi which explains the juxtaposition of the story of the Spies with the incident of Miriam's punishment. Rashi explains that Miriam was stricken with Tzaraas as punishment for speaking Lashon HaRah [slander] against her brother, Moshe. The Spies were aware of this. They should have taken the lesson to heart and not spoken slander against the Land of Israel, but they failed to do so.

Rabbi Berel Weinberger asks that there are two parshiyos in the Torah (Tazriah and Metzorah) that deal at length with the evils of speaking slanderously. If there is a complaint against the Spies for not being well-versed on the severity of the prohibition against speaking Lashon HaRah, the complaint should be that they did not properly study the parshiyos of Tazriah and Metzorah! We certainly do not need the incident of Miriam and Aharon to teach us that one should not speak Lashon HaRah.

Rabbi Weinberger suggests an interesting idea. Miriam did two things wrong. She spoke ill of Moshe Rabbeinu, but she did something else wrong as well: She equated the prophetic status of Moshe to the prophetic status of any other prophet. One must understand that there are differences in life. Moshe Rabbeinu was not just another prophet. "Not so is my servant Moshe. In all My House he is the most faithful. Mouth to mouth do I speak to him, in a vision and not in riddles..." [Bamidbar 12:7-8] Do not make the mistake of comparison when there is no comparison.

This was the same complaint that G-d had against the Spies. Eretz Yisrael is special. It is different from all other lands. "They saw (the result of the incident with Miriam) and did not draw the proper lesson" means they fell into the trap of judging the Land of Israel by standard measures. One cannot

make the same military assessments. One cannot make the same economic assessments. Eretz Yisrael is different!

The lesson they failed to learn from Miriam is the need to make appropriate differentiations and not to equate things that are incommensurate.

Rabbi Weinberger explains that he is appalled by the use of the word Holocaust for anything other than the description of what happened to the Jews of Europe. The use of that term any time an injustice is done against people profanes it and equates that which should not be equated. It should be reserved for nothing less than the unprecedented systematic extermination of six million people. Making such inappropriate comparisons degrades and insults the people to whom it really happened.

Rav Meir Shapiro once commented that the difference between the Jews of America and the Jews of Europe is that in America people know how to make Kiddush whereas in Europe they knew also how to make Havdalah [distinctions]. We fail to make proper "havdalah" here. Not everything is the same. We are constantly bombarded with "moral equivalencies" that are totally absurd and thoroughly insulting. Moshe Rabbeinu is not to be compared with anyone else and Eretz Yisrael is not to be compared to any place else. We need to know when things are equal and when they are radically different.

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