

NOT BEING AN INGRATE IS NOT QUITE THE SAME AS BEING A

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Ki Savo

Not Being An Ingrate Is Not Quite The Same As Being A 'Makir Tov'

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly portion: CD #912, The Phony Tzedakah Collector. Good Shabbos!

Parshas Ki Savo begins with the mitzvah of Hav'as Bikkurim [bringing the first fruits to the Bais HaMikdash] and Mikra Bikkurim [reciting the Biblical passage associated with that ritual]. The farmer brings his first fruits to the Bais HaMikdash in Jerusalem, hands them over to the Kohen, and then recites a passage telling the story of all the kindnesses the Almighty has performed. He places this story of personal Divine Kindness within the historical context of the entire development of the Jewish nation. Under most circumstances, a person not only brings the Bikkurim, he also recites the associated passage.

As we have said many times, this passage is the prototype of Hakaras haTov - verbal expression of gratitude and indebtedness. The Medrash states regarding the words "Bereishis Bara Elokim" [In the beginning G-d created...] that the world was created for the sake of 3 entities that were called "Reishis" [first]: Israel was called Reishis; Torah was called Reishis; and Bikkurim were called Reishis. The Alshich wonders at the inclusion of the mitzvah of the First Fruits in the list of the top 3 reasons the world was created. The Alshich explains that this mitzvah symbolizes "Hakaras HaTov" [gratitude], which is such a fundamental idea in Judaism that it is listed along with Israel and Torah as one of the 3 reasons for creation of the world!

Rashi himself quotes [Devarim 26:3] a Sifrei on the words "And you shall say to him (i.e. - the Kohen): She'aincha kafui tova - to show that you are not unappreciative." The Sefer Avir Yosef from Rav Yakov Yosef Rineman, shlit"a asks a question: Why doesn't the Sifrei use a positive expression "to show I acknowledge favors" rather than the negative expression "to show I am not ungrateful"?

Rav Rineman answers that when a person acknowledges kindness to the best of his ability, he expresses the full length and breadth of his sense of appreciation. A mere thank-you does not

suffice. The five or six pasukim mentioned in the Mikra Bikkurim passage do suffice to meet the minimum requirement for fulfillment of the obligation to recognize favors in the positive sense. However, the best we can say regarding someone saying Mikra Bikkurim is that he no longer falls into the category of an ingrate. He has still not expressed the full length and breadth of his sense of appreciation.

There Are Messages All the Time

The second insight I would like to share also comes from the Sefer Avir Yosef.

In Parshas Ki Savo, the people are commanded: "This day, Hashem, your G-d, commands you to perform these statutes and the laws, and you shall observe and perform them with all your heart and with all your soul. You have distinguished Hashem today to be a G-d for you and to walk in His ways and to observe His statutes, His commandments, and His laws, and to listen to His voice." [Devorim 26:16-17]

The Ramban and others ask what is the additional nuance contained in the concluding phrase "and to listen to His voice"? After having specified walking in His ways and observance of the statutes (Chukkim), commandments (Mitzvos), and laws (Mishpatim) what is left that the Torah needs to continue on with the words "and to listen to His voice" (lishmo'a b'kolo)? Has everything not already been said?

The Ramban offers several interpretations. The Ramban suggests that "lishmo'a b'kolo" can mean to listen to the voice of (future) prophets. However, in truth, listening to a prophet is already a mitzvah and it should have been subsumed under the expression "lishmor mitzvosav" [to observe His commandments].

The Sefer Avir Yosef suggests an entirely different approach. We are accustomed to the idea that in post Biblical and certainly in post Talmudic times, the Almighty does not communicate with us anymore. In the time of the the Bais HaMikdash, there were prophets and there was the Urim V'Tumim worn by the Kohen Gadol. There were ways that the Master of the Universe "talked" with us. Even in later times, there was what the Talmud refers to as a "Bas Kol" - some type of Heavenly Voice that emerged from above to communicate somehow with us. Today it is different. When is the last time the Almighty "talked to us"? We live under the impression that the Ribono shel Olam does not communicate.

This is inaccurate. The Master of the World does communicate with us. It is not as accessible or blatant or open as hearing it from a prophet or even from a 'Bas Kol', but there are messages all the time. The Chofetz Chaim used to say on the pasuk "He makes the winds His messengers" (Oseh malachav ruchos) [Tehillim 104:4] that hurricanes talk to us. When the Chofetz Chaim used to hear thunder claps, he would ask "What does Father want?" Throughout life, the Almighty sends us

messages.

The words "and to listen to His voice" mean it is our obligation and responsibility to perk up our ears and try to hear the message that the Ribono shel Olam is sending to us.

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter once walked past a shoemaker's store late at night and found the shoemaker still at work, fixing a pair of shoes. Rabbi Yisrael Salanter asked him, "It is so late at night, why are you still working?" The shoemaker responded "As long as there is oil in the candle, there is work to be done." This was an innocuous statement, but Rav Yisrael Salanter took it to mean that as long as there is "oil in the candle" - i.e. as long as the soul burns yet within man, there is work to be done in terms of service to the Almighty.

The Talmud tells the famous story of Rabbi Akiva who was unlettered until the age of 40. Rabbi Akiva walked by a stream and saw how a rock had been smoothed by constant dripping of water over time. Rabbi Akiva said that if water can make a rock smooth then Torah which is compared to water can make penetrate my head and I can learn as well. Rabbi Akiva thus viewed something as pedestrian as a stream of water and seized on the message he saw therein to change his life.

These are a few examples of "lishmo'a b'kolo" [to listen to His voice]. We need to aspire to this level of sensitivity to G-d's messages and "listen to His voice" by taking spiritual insight from everyday interactions and observations.

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