



The Great Obligation Of Hakaras Hatov

» *We May Not Reject An Egyptian Because Of Our Gratitude To Them*

The verse states: "You shall not reject an Edomite for he is your brother. You shall not reject an Egyptian for you were a stranger in his land." Rashi writes: You shall not reject an Edomite even though they deserve to be rejected because they came out against you with swords. You shall not reject an Egyptian even though they threw your male offspring into the river. Why? Because they gave you lodging in a time of duress. .

We see from here how remarkable vast is the extent of the obligation to have hakaras hatov, gratitude, to anyone who did even a small favor for you. We see that we must even have gratitude to the nation that attacked us by the sword and the nation that enslaved and tortured us. Despite the tremendous pain they caused us, we still may not be ungrateful for the small favors they did for us.

» *How Stringent Chazal Were Regarding This Obligation*

We shall now cite several sources in Chazal which describe how stringent they were regarding the obligation of hakaras hatov:

The Gemara in Bava Kama explains the aforementioned verse by stating: "if you drank from a pit, do not throw dirt in it." Rashi explains: If you needed something once, do not ever shame it.

We find this trait personified by Moshe and Aharon, from the verses that state that Moshe was told by Hashem that he could not hit the water to start the plague of dam, blood, or the plague of tzefradea, frogs, nor did he strike the earth to start the plague of kinim, lice. Instead, Aharon struck the water and the earth. Rashi explains that Moshe Rabenu had an obligation of gratitude to the water for shielding him when he was placed in it as a baby. Therefore, he could not strike it. So too, the earth protected him when he killed an

Egyptian taskmaster and hid the body in the earth. Therefore, he had an obligation of gratitude towards it and he could not strike it.

The Maharal uses the Gemara's analogy to explain this concept. He writes: This teaches us the proper way to act. If you drank from a pit do not throw dirt into it. Therefore, it was not appropriate for it to be struck by him, so it was struck by Aharon.

We also find that Moshe Rabenu understood the extent of this obligation on his own. It is stated that Hashem commanded Moshe and the Jewish nation: "Distress the Midianites and you shall smite them." However, Moshe Rabenu did not fulfill the command personally, as the Daas Zekeinim of the Baalei Tosfos states: The Holy One Blessed is He told Moshe to avenge them himself. But he sent others to do it. Since he grew up in Midian, he said that it would be improper for him to destroy them because they did him a favor, as people say, "If you drank from a pit do not throw dirt in it." The Rabenu Bechaya also says: Moshe, who grew up in Midian, did not go. This is as people say, "If you drank from a pit do not throw dirt in it."

» *Why Is This Obligation So Important?*

We see that this obligation even extends to inanimate objects, such as water and earth. We can understand why one must show thanks to a person who helped him, but why must one express gratitude to an object that has no feelings?

Furthermore, even the idea of gratitude to a person needs explanation because we know that no one can do anything on this world without Hashem's assistance and permission. In truth, Hashem is the one helps us, and the person who does the favor is merely an emissary of Hashem. He is not the actual cause of the help.

We find this concept applies when – in an opposite case – someone harms another person. Shimi ben Geira viciously cursed Dovid Hamelech, but Dovid responded by saying: "Hashem bade him to curse." The verse also

tells us : “Woe that Ashur is the rod of My wrath, and My fury is a staff in their hands.” The verse is telling us that the nations who harm us are not acting of their own accord. Rather, they are the staff in Hashem’s hands . When a dog is hit by a stick, he attacks the stick. He does not realize that the stick is controlled by a man and has no power of its own. We must realize that there is no reason to attack the “stick” because the true source is Hashem. For this reason, there is no purpose for us to be angry at one who harms us.

We may therefore ask: Why must we show gratitude to one who helps us? Isn’t he also merely an instrument in Hashem’s hand?

The Gemara states : Rava said to Raba bar Mari: Whence can be derived the saying of: Though the wine belongs to the owner, the thanks are given to the butler? He replied: As it is written: “And you shall put Your honor upon him, that all the congregation of the children of Yisroel may hear and see. And it is also written: “And Yehoshua ben Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, for Moshe had laid his hands upon him. And the children of Israel listened to him.” We see that one must have hakaras hatov to someone who does something for him, even if that person is merely the emissary of someone else and is doing nothing on his own.

The Gr”a states that we see from here that one must express gratitude for a favor someone does for him even if that person was forced to do it and had no desire to help you. The butler had no intention of doing anything besides serving his master. But the one he gave wine to must still be grateful to him because he is the one who actually performed the action that he benefitted from.

Be that as it may, it is still astounding that we are commanded to show gratitude to the Egyptians – who not only had no intention to do anything for our benefit, but actually tortured and killed us and caused us tremendous pain and suffering. Even the favor they did do for us – allowing us to dwell in Goshen – was only done for their own benefit. This is clearly stated in the Gemara : The Egyptians only brought Yisroel close for their own needs, as is it stated that Pharaoh said : “If you know that there are capable men among them, make them livestock officers over what is mine.”

» **What Was The Terrible Sin Of Amon And Moav?**

We find in the Torah that there are two nations that are cut off completely from Klal Yisroel. These are the nations of Amon and Moav.

In our Parshah it is stated that they are the only nations that may never enter the congregation of Hashem – even after ten generations.

The Torah further prohibits any connection with these nations, stating : “You shall not ever seek out their welfare or their good, all your days.” The Ramban cites the Sifri that explains: Since it previously stated , “When you approach a city to wage war against it, you shall propose peace to it”, I might have thought this applies to Amon and Moav as well. It therefore states: “You shall not seek out their welfare.” The Ramban adds: There is an obligation to propose peace even during a war of mitzvah, even to the Seven Nations of Canaan, as we see that Moshe proposed peace to Sichon king of Emor. But we may not propose peace to Amon and Moav.

The Ramban also cites a Medrash that states: Elisha told the nation : “And He will deliver Moav into your hands. And you shall strike every fortified city and every choice city, and you shall fell every good tree, and you shall stop up all springs of water.” They asked him: Doesn’t the Torah command not to destroy trees? He responded: This is true regarding every other nation. But these are slight and disgraced, as is stated : “And this will be slight in the eyes of Hashem, and He will deliver Moav into your hands.” And it is stated: “Do not seek out their welfare.” This refers to their trees.

The Sefer Sham Derech asks: Why are Amon and Moav cut off completely from having any connection to the nation of

Yisroel, to the extent that they may never convert and we are forbidden to seek out their welfare, and during times of war we are permitted to harm them and destroy their trees – things which we do not find by any other nation. Many nations caused suffering to Klal Yisroel over the generations. None were worse than Egypt, who enslaved us for 110 years, forced us to do hard labor, and issued many terrible decrees against us. But we are still commanded not to reject an Egyptian, and they are permitted to convert after three generations. The Edomites came out against us with swords and didn’t allow us to pass through their land,

“... a time had come when the descendants of Avrohom were in need of kindness from the descendants of Lot, and this was an opportunity for them to express their gratitude. However, they ignored their obligation and showed no hakaras hatov...”

but we are still commanded not to reject an Edomite. The Torah relates the reason Amon and Moav are specifically excluded: “Because they did not greet you with bread and water on the way, when you left Egypt, and because they hired Bilaam the son of Beor from Pethor in Aram Naharaim against you, to curse you.” How is this so much worse than all the evil things the other nations did to us?

» *Amon And Moav Lacked Hakaras Hatov!*

He answers by quoting the Ramban who points out that Amon and Moav were descendants of Lot who was the recipient of the kindness of Avrohom who risked his life to save him from captivity, and it was in Avrohom's merit that Lot and his daughters were saved from Sodom. They, therefore, should have had gratitude and acted kindly to Klal Yisroel. But, instead, they acted wickedly towards them – Moav hired Bilaam to curse them and Amon did not greet them with bread and water when they came to their land.

The Ramban discerns from the verses that only Amon failed to greet the nation with food and drink. Both Esav and Moav, when they realized the nation had no intention of waging war with them, brought out food and drink to them. But Amon did not greet them at all. Therefore, they are considered the worst sinners, and the verse lists them and their sin first, and only mentions Moav afterwards.

The Torah is teaching us that the trait of lacking hakaras hatov is extremely deplorable. It is so reprehensible that it caused a complete break off between Yisroel and Amon for all generations. This is true even though we are speaking about a kindness that was performed by Avrohom many generations earlier. The current people of Amon had derived no benefit from the current nation of Yisroel. Still and all, a time had come when the descendants of Avrohom were in need of kindness from the descendants of Lot, and this was an opportunity for them to express their gratitude. However, they ignored their obligation and showed no hakaras hatov. This clearly indicated that a great level of depravity and wickedness was embedded deep within the hearts and souls of this nation which could never be eradicated in future generations. They therefore can never have any connection with Klal Yisroel.

This was not meant as a punishment for their sin. It is certain that the sins of the Egyptians and Edomites were far worse than the sin of not greeting the nation with bread and water. Rather, this episode showed how deeply entrenched this nation was in their negative character traits. The lack of basic gratitude showed that this nation could never be rehabilitated because they lacked basic decency and were proven to be rotten and wicked to their very core. They are therefore referred to

as a “lowly and disgraced nation” , and are forever banned from Yisroel.

We are prohibited from ever seeking their welfare because the soul of Klal Yisroel must be pure and clean, with no contaminations. Chazal tell us : “There are three distinguishing characteristics of this nation: They are merciful, bashful and benevolent.” But, by their lack of gratitude, Amon and Moav were proven to be contaminated by pure wickedness, which defines their entire essence. Because of this, Klal Yisroel may have absolutely no connection to them.

The extent of the Torah's disdain for Amon and Moav because of their lack of gratitude, to the extent that we may have no contact with them and we may not seek their welfare, is truly remarkable. This can be explained through the words of the Mesilas Yesharim : If a man is drawn after this world and distances himself from his Creator, he will become damaged and will damage the world with him. But if he rules over himself and attaches himself to his Creator and uses this world only as a means of assisting him in his service of the Creator, he will be uplifted and the world itself will be uplifted with him.

Even if members of Amon and Moav would convert, this essential flaw would remain within them. This is stated in the Targum of Yonason ben Uziel: “Do not seek their welfare or good for all of your days. For even if they would convert, hatred would remain in their hearts against the world.” This means that even after they convert, the hatred and ungratefulness would remain in their hearts because it is so deeply entrenched that it can never be changed.

» *We Must Have Hakaras Hatov Even To An Emissary In Order To Maintain Our Kindly Character Traits*

We see from all of this that the trait of hakaras hatov is, first and foremost, a positive attribute for the person himself. If one drinks from a pit and then proceeds to throw dirt in it, it will have a detrimental effect on his own soul. By doing an act of ingratitude to an emissary of kindness for him it is as if he is openly showing a lack of gratitude to the One who was the root of this goodness. By doing so, he is planting the evil seed of a lack of hakaras hatov within his heart. Therefore, there is an obligation to express gratitude even to an inanimate object that one benefitted from or to a person who was merely an emissary of another to help him – in order to maintain one's upright character trait of hakaras hatov and the sensitivity of one's soul for this crucial trait. One who flaunts this trait is actually showing a lack of concern for his own essence – for his own soul. He is allowing his soul to be contaminated by this wicked trait, which can become entrenched so deeply that it is impossible to remove.