



THANKS a lot!

One of the most important lessons we're meant to learn from the exodus is to recognise the good that's done for us by others – and, in return, show our gratitude | BY ROBERT SUSSMAN

THERE'S A STUNNING EPISODE THAT TAKES PLACE

after Moshe encounters Hashem by the burning bush and is commanded to return at once to Egypt, appear before Pharaoh, and begin the long-awaited process of the redemption of the Jewish people from our seemingly endless servitude. Rather than do as he was commanded and race back to Egypt straightaway, the midrash relates Moshe's response to Hashem: "Master of the Universe, I am not able to do so because Yisro...opened the door of his home to me [when I fled from Egypt] and I am...obligated to him. How can I go without his permission?" Moshe knew as well as anyone that the Jewish people were suffering terribly in a situation where our very lives were at stake on a daily basis and yet, despite the situation calling for his immediate departure, he instead took precious time to ask Yisro's permission before he departed because he felt indebted to Yisro for the kindnesses that he had done for him.

But Yisro's and Moshe's kindnesses were a two-way street. Moshe had also done kindnesses with Yisro and the kind-

ness that Yisro had shown to Moshe was not only "owed" to him, but, as we'll see, selfishly motivated. Yisro had¹ abandoned his role as a priest for idol worshipers and, as a result, had been excommunicated to the point that no one would have anything to do with him – not even work for him to tend his flocks, so he was forced to have his daughters do the job. His daughters were likewise despised and abused by the other local shepherds, who would drive them away from the town's well, where they would go to give water to their sheep. When Moshe fled to Midian, he encountered Yisro's daughters, who were being abused at the well by the other shepherds, saved them, and gave water to their sheep. When the girls later told their father what had happened, Yisro asked them why they had left Moshe behind and not invited him to their home for something to eat. The midrash explains that Yisro was really thinking that perhaps this man, who was not from Midian and unfamiliar with the status of Yisro's family, might marry one of his daughters. So we find that Yisro did a kindness for

Moshe because of how it might suit his own interests! And on top of this, Yisro was obligated to open the door of his home to Moshe because Moshe had saved his daughters and drawn water from the well for them. So why then was Moshe obligated to Yisro and why did he consider Yisro's honour more important than the hastening of the redemption of the children of Israel from Egypt?

Despite the fact that Yisro was obligated to open the door of his home to Moshe, it does not diminish at all Moshe's obligation of hakaros hatov – which literally means "recognising the good [that was done for a person]", but also implies "showing gratitude" or "appreciation" for that good – to Yisro for this act. This is because of an important principle: the good that we receive does not come from the hand of the person from whom we receive it, but from Hashem. And yet, nevertheless, there is an obligation of showing gratitude to the person through whose hands we actually received the good that came to us because, for whatever reason, our benefactor mer-

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ited to be a part of things and serve as Hashem's agent for transmitting the good that we received. And, just as important, were it not for the benefactor's meriting to be a part of such a thing, perhaps the good that we received would not have been transmitted to us at all! Therefore, the obligation of showing gratitude exists even in a case where one benefits accidentally – where the benefactor did not intend to do good for the recipient, because, regardless, it was through the benefactor's hands that the good came to be. And, when the benefactor intends to do good for the recipient,

there is an additional reason to be grateful, even in a case where the giver was obligated to do good such as Yisro for Moshe, because the benefactor still had a choice whether or not to do good, and, nonetheless, he chose to do good, and therefore one is obligated in return to show gratitude towards him.

EXPECT NOTHING, APPRECIATE EVERYTHING

Good character traits are the foundation for the Torah, and for being able to fulfil Hashem's mitzvos. The exodus from Egypt served to inculcate in us feelings

of gratitude to Hashem for liberating us from slavery. To put it another way, the purpose of the exodus was for us to take notice of the many miracles and kindnesses that Hashem did for us, and, as a result, cause us to want to show our gratitude for all of those things. It's this gratitude that obligates us to fulfil the entire Torah. And this was why Moshe was so worried about causing a defect in this character trait in particular. He knew that the entire exodus rested on this character trait and, if he himself were to have a defect in it, how could he possibly influence the rest of the Jewish people in a positive fashion regarding it. Feeling and expressing gratitude is not just one of many nice qualities for a person to possess, but it is an essential and fundamental character trait for every person – Jew and non-Jew – to have. If we look closely at the events surrounding the exodus from Egypt, we find this theme of gratitude running through it.



MA NISHTANA

CHAG PESACH SAMEACH



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GOING TO THE DOGS (AND DONKEYS)

Included among the many mitzvos related to Pesach and the exodus from Egypt is one that appears completely unrelated: the mitzvah of redeeming a firstborn male donkey. Our Sages ask²: what's the difference between firstborn male donkeys and the firstborn of other non-kosher animals such as horses and camels which could justify a mitzvah regarding the one but not the other? After noting that Hashem commanded it to be so, they strive to offer an idea that may have been behind the commandment, "[The donkeys] helped the children of Israel at the time of the exodus from Egypt – each and every one of the children of Israel had 90 Libyan donkeys loaded with silver and gold from the Egyptians." In other words, because the donkeys helped us in our exodus from Egypt, they were forever made into an object of mitzvah. We can learn much about the concept of gratitude from this mitzvah. Although it's obvious that we need to have gratitude towards a person who intended to do us a favour, from here we see that we need to show gratitude even towards animals, which lack thought and intention. So too, if we need to express gratitude towards an animal who acts unintentionally, then how much more so do we need to show our appreciation towards a person who does good for us, albeit unintentionally – and even towards someone who was forced to perform a kindness for

us. We also see from this mitzvah that the concept of gratitude applies not only towards the one who did the good himself, but can even apply towards an entire category, for example, in this case: all donkeys. And, there's no time limit for the expression of gratitude as the mitzvah³ of redeeming a firstborn male donkey is an eternal obligation for all of the generations that followed after.

We find a similar example by dogs. The Torah tells us⁴, "You shall not eat the flesh [of an animal] that was torn in the field (ie. treif); to the dog you shall throw it." Rashi asks, "Why does it say 'to the dog'? [To] teach you that Hashem doesn't deprive reward due to any creature, as it says, 'And [against] all the children of Israel, no dog wagged its tongue [ie. barked].' Hashem said, 'Give it its due reward.'" Why did dogs receive a reward? Unlike the donkeys, they didn't actually help us with anything when we were going out from Egypt. We learn from this that gratitude is not specifically for someone who helped us by doing a particular action, but even for dogs that allowed the children of Israel to go out from Egypt in peace and with honour, not dis-

turbing the great Kiddush Hashem (sanctification of G-d's name) that was taking place. Even inaction can warrant us to show gratitude for it!

GATHERING DUST AND NOT MAKING WAVES

And there's even a level of recognising goodness and showing gratitude above these. Hashem famously instructed⁵ Moshe to have Aharon carry out some of the plagues instead of Moshe himself doing the actions that were necessary – specifically, blood and frogs, which came about as a result of Aharon striking the Nile, and lice, which came about as result of Aharon striking the dust of the earth. Hashem did not allow Moshe to carry out these plagues because the Nile protected Moshe when, as a baby, he was thrown into it, and the dust protected Moshe when he killed an Egyptian officer and hid the body in the sand. Despite the fact that the water and dust were inanimate objects, Hashem taught Moshe that he was obligated to show gratitude towards them for the benefit that he received from them.

The gemara teaches⁶ that one who finds food (ie. on the ground) must not pass it by and leave it there. Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, ztz"l, explains that we must have gratitude for the food that we eat. Despite the fact that the food was thrown on the ground by someone else, it's a disgrace for the food to be left there. Why must we be so concerned about how we treat inanimate objects that obviously don't have any feelings? It's not like those objects care how we treat them. It's because of how it affects us! Recognising and appreciating the good that has been done for us helps to implant within us feelings of gratitude, and, failing to do so, chas v'shalom (G-d forbid), causes profound damage to our character.

“ THE GOOD THAT WE RECEIVE DOES NOT COME FROM THE HAND OF THE PERSON FROM WHOM WE RECEIVE IT, BUT FROM HASHEM. ”



“FEELING AND EXPRESSING GRATITUDE IS NOT JUST ONE OF MANY NICE QUALITIES FOR A PERSON TO POSSESS, BUT IT IS AN ESSENTIAL AND FUNDAMENTAL CHARACTER TRAIT FOR EVERY PERSON – JEW AND NON-JEW – TO HAVE.”

BLACK SHEEP OF THE FAMILY

The Torah teaches⁷ us that two nations, Amon and Moav, are not permitted to ever become a part of the Jewish people (ie. convert). What makes this even more stunning is that both of these nations came from Avraham's own brother-in-law (Sarah's brother), Lot. And therein lies the problem. Both of these nations, who came from the children of Lot, were indebted to us, the children of Avraham, for all that our forefather had done for theirs, including saving his life on more than one occasion. Despite the fact these things took place hundreds of years in the past and Lot's descendants likely had little, if any, connection to these events and may have even felt that whatever favour was done was not even done for

them, we see that there is no statute of limitations on the gratitude that is owed for a kind deed.

But the things these two nations did to warrant such a punishment could not have been more different. While Moav famously hired the prophet Bilam to curse us, Amon failed to greet us with bread and water when we passed by their border. Surely Moav's crime of trying to curse us was far worse than Amon's lack of basic good manners, so how can the Torah punish the children of Amon with a punishment equal to that of Moav? We see from the fact that the Torah equates the two that something more is at stake here – and that failing to show gratitude is far more serious an issue than we might suspect.

What makes this episode particularly noteworthy is that the bread and water that Amon failed to provide for us was actually not even needed by us at all! The midrash teaches that the entire 40 years that we were traveling in the wilderness, manna fell from heaven, water came from the well that travelled with us, and quail was common for us – so what sin was there in Amon's not bringing us bread and water? This was a matter of *derech eretz* (basic good manners) of greeting a traveler with food and drink. But more than this, we also see from here that the obligation of showing gratitude exists even towards someone who does not need the good that we have to offer. As we saw with inanimate objects, showing gratitude is not about the recipient of the gratitude and his needs, so much as it is about how such behaviour affects the person who is obligated to show it. Despite the fact that Israel did not need anything, Amon was still obligated to show their gratitude by greeting Israel with bread and water. Amon's failing resulted in a profound and eternal blemish in their character to the point that they would never be fit to join the Jewish people.



IN THE LAND OF THE PHARAOHS

Surely we would think that if Amon can't join the Jewish people because of a lack of gratitude and Moav can't join the Jewish people because they tried to have Bilam curse us, then Egypt who brutally enslaved us for over a hundred years – something we recall each year at our seder tables without fail – shouldn't be able to either? Think again. The Torah teaches⁸, "Do not despise the Egyptian because you were a stranger in his land." Rashi explains, "Do not despise the Egyptian entirely, even though the Egyptians threw your male children into the Nile. What's the reason? Because they gave you lodging during a difficult time (ie. the famine that was taking place that resulted in Yaakov and his family going down to Egypt)." Despite the Egyptians enslaving us with incredibly harsh bondage for 116 years, we are still obligated to show them gratitude for the hospitality that they showed us for the 94 years that they hosted us before the slavery started. It's an important lesson: just because someone does something bad, it doesn't erase the good that he did.

A SLIPPERY SLOPE

So, what's so bad about being ungrateful? Our Sages teach⁹ that it's like denying the existence of Hashem. "A man who is ungrateful towards his fellow, tomorrow he will be ungrateful towards his Creator." Gratitude – whether it be to another person or to Hashem – has a single root in the soul, and if there's a blemish in the character trait of recognising the good that was done by someone else, then such a person will also fail to recognise the kindnesses of Hashem that were done for him. A person who is ungrateful lacks concern for the good deeds that have been done for him and also tries to diminish the value of any favour received until the point that he can completely deny that anything good was even done for him at all. He may, for example, claim that he never received a particular thing, but instead took it without any protest from its owner, or he may claim that the giver was obligated for whatever



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reason, perhaps by virtue of his position (like a salesman in a shop or a repairman who receives payment for his work) to do that good for him and therefore there is no need to be grateful. In truth, the obligation of showing gratitude is not diminished even if the giving was by virtue of a person's position because, nevertheless, the recipient received something and, therefore, he needs to give thanks.

It's just a small hop, skip, and a jump from denying the good done by others to denying the tremendous good that Hashem constantly does with His entire creation, to denying that there is even a Creator at all who brings about that good. Our Sages use Pharaoh to illustrate this point. The Torah first tells us¹⁰ that a "new king arose who did not know Yosef". Sure-

ly all of Egypt knew of the deeds of Yosef, who served as viceroy, second only to Pharaoh himself, for decades (having been appointed in the year 2229 and having died 80 years later in 2309¹¹) and was instrumental in protecting the Egyptians from the devastating effects of the many years of famine that took place. Rather, Pharaoh chose to be oblivious to what Yosef had done and to be ungrateful towards his family, the Jewish people, enslaving them and treating them despicably. After years of keeping the Jews in bondage, Pharaoh said¹² to Moshe and Aharon, "Who is Hashem that I should listen to him...I don't know Hashem." Pharaoh began by denying the good that Yosef had done and, ultimately, wound up denying Hashem's existence.

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DENIAL...IT'S NOT JUST A RIVER IN EGYPT

The reason why a man does not want to recognise a favour that was done for him, and chooses to deny it, is because showing gratitude creates a sort of servitude – the receiver feels indebted to return the favour to the giver. So long as he has not returned the favour, the recipient remains indebted. A person denies that something good was done for him in order to liberate himself from the obligation to return the favour, be it to another person or to Hashem. Someone who is ungrateful chooses not to recognise the kindnesses done for him by Hashem in order that he should not feel obligated to Hashem in any way and, therefore, free to do as his own heart desires. And from this we can gain an insight into why we were not commanded¹³ to just believe that Hashem exists, but to believe that "Hashem, who brought [us] out of the land of Egypt from the house of bondage", exists. Included along with the obligation to believe in Hashem is a reminder of the great kindnesses that Hashem did for us – without which, as we say in the Haggadah each year, we would still be slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt.

It's a person's ability to recognise the kindnesses that he has received from Hashem, which, in turn, causes him to feel indebted to Hashem, which results in a willing to serve Hashem – to pay Him back, so to speak. So, we see, recognising good and showing our gratitude for it is a necessary condition for serving Hashem. The entire exodus from Egypt and all of the many miracles connected with it were in order to strengthen our faith in Hashem while, at the same time, enabling us to serve Him as a result of our feelings of indebtedness to Him for all that He did for us. Much of the Haggadah serves to detail the many miracles, wonders, and kindnesses that Hashem did for us, and this is why it's important for us to see ourselves, as the Haggadah emphasises, as having personally gone out from Egypt, as having personally benefited from all of these things. The more we are able to see and appreciate these things, the more indebted we will feel, and the greater our service and devotion to Hashem will be. ■

Adapted from sichos by the Sifsei Chaim, Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, ztz"l.

¹ Bereishis Rabah 1:32

² See Brachos 5b

³ See Shemos 13:13

⁴ Id. 22:30

⁵ See id. 7:19 and 8:12 and Rashi on those verses

⁶ Eruvin 64b

⁷ Devarim 23:4-7

⁸ Id. 23:8 (emphasis added to the Rashi)

⁹ Mishnas Rabbi Eliezer

¹⁰ Shemos 1:8

¹¹ See The Jewish Timeline Encyclopedia by Rabbi Mattis Kantor, Jason Aronson Press (1992)

¹² Shemos 5:2

¹³ Id. 20:2

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