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Yisroel ben Beryl a”h

a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

Gratitude for Life

PARSHAS VAYEITZEI 5777

One of the most fundamental of *middos tovos* (positive traits) on which the Masters of Mussar (ethical) teachings expound is the attribute of *hakaras hatov* (literally: recognition of the good) – displaying gratitude toward a benefactor.

Clean Judgment

The extent to which the righteous excel in this area is evident, for example, from the Gemara’s account of the conduct of certain judges. As we know, the Torah forbids a judge from accepting bribes (“*Lo sikach shochad* – You shall not take a bribe” [*Devarim 16:19*]). Even charging a straightforward judicial fee is unacceptable, as the Mishnah states (*Bechoros 4:6*):

הַנוֹטֵל שְׂכָר לְדוֹן, דִּינָיו בָּטְלִים.

“Regarding a judge who accepts a fee to adjudicate – his judgments are annulled.”

But the Gemara demonstrates just how far many of the Sages would go to avoid even the slightest appearance of remuneration or acceptance of favor. Thus it relates, for instance, the example of Ameimar. As he judged a particular case, the wind blew and carried a feather that rested on his head. Someone removed it, prompting Ameimar to tell his benefactor: “I’m sorry, but I am now disqualified from judging your case” (*Kesubos 105b*).

Ameimar’s decision may appear puzzling; was there really a concern that such an august and pious figure would be swayed to pervert justice in return for such a seemingly minor act? Actually, explains R’ Shlomo Karelitz, it is precisely on account of his righteousness that such a concern existed. This is because the righteous fully appreciate the value and urgency of the obligation of *hakaras hatov*, truly feeling indebted to whoever benefits them in any way (R’ Yechiel Michel Stern, *Middos V’hanhagos Tovos*, p. 204).

On the other end of the scale, being a *kafuy tov* (ingrate) is considered one of the most egregious of negative traits and the sign of a corrupted soul (*cf. Ramban, Devarim 32:6*). It is quite interesting how the stark contrast between these primary qualities – *hakaras hatov* and *kefuyas hatov* – are manifest in this week’s *parshah*, as we shall see.

We have seen above how even minimal benefit occasions a serious obligation to display gratitude. Of course, as the magnitude of the benefit increases, the obligation of *hakaras hatov* increases in kind. And what could be greater than the gift of life? One who receives such a benefit must certainly be obligated to display overwhelming gratitude to his savior.

The Yerushalmi (*Terumos 8:3*) relates an incident wherein someone invited a certain *rav* to dine with him. The *rav* was surprised to find a dog sitting next to him by the table. “Are you trying to mock me?” he asked his host. In response, the host explained why the dog was accorded such a place of honor: “You see, this dog saved our lives. One time, marauders entered the town and attempted to abduct my wife. They would have succeeded if this dog had not intervened.”

A Study in Contrasts

There were certain individuals in this week’s *parshah* who literally owed their existence to Ya’akov Avinu: namely, the sons of Lavan. Upon Ya’akov’s initial arrival in Lavan’s house, the latter had only daughters. The Torah mentions that at the time, Lavan’s daughter Rachel

served as shepherd, and – as Rashi comments (*Bereishis 30:27*) – would someone with sons appoint his daughters to herd his sheep? Later on, however, Lavan relates the following to Ya'akov: “*Va'yevarecheini Hashem bi'glalecha* – Hashem has blessed me on your account”

(*Ibid.*) In what way was this blessing manifest? Rashi explains: ...בָּנִים לֹא הָיוּ לִי בְּנִים – “When you came here, I had no sons’... Now, he had sons.”

Thus, it was in the merit of Ya'akov that Lavan's sons even existed. And how did they display their gratitude? By informing on him to their father! As it states (*Bereishis 31:1*): וַיִּשְׁמַע – “And (Lavan) heard the words of Lavan's sons, saying: ‘Ya'akov has taken all that belonged to our father...’” Lavan was a dangerous figure who did attempt to exterminate Ya'akov and his progeny. As we recount each year by the Seder: “*Lavan bikeish la'akor es hakol, she'ne'emar: 'Arami oveid avi*” – Lavan sought to wipe out the entirety (of the nascent Jewish people), as it states (*Devarim 26:5*): ‘The Aramean (attempted) to wipe out my forefather’” (*Pesach Haggadah*). His anger stoked by his sons' report, Lavan set out in pursuit of Ya'akov and his family. He would indeed have exterminated them had Hashem not intervened. As Lavan himself later admitted to his son-in-law: וְיִשְׁלַח יָדִי לְעִשׂוֹת עִמָּכֶם רָע וְאֵלֵקִי אֲבִיכֶם אֶמַּשׁ אֶמַּר אֵלַי לֵאמֹר הַשְׁמֵר לָךְ מִדְּבַר עִם יַעֲקֹב מְטוֹב – “It is within my power to inflict harm upon you; but the G-d of your fathers said to me last night: ‘Guard yourself from even speaking with Ya'akov, whether benignly or maliciously’” (*Bereishis 31:29*). This was the man Lavan's sons instigated against Ya'akov. Such was their gratitude! They paid back Ya'akov's gift of life by imperiling his own.

It was a much different story, however, in Ya'akov's household. As he prepared to leave, Ya'akov sent a messenger to summon Rachel and Le'ah to meet him in the field: וַיִּשְׁלַח יַעֲקֹב – “And Ya'akov sent and called for Rachel and Le'ah (to come) to the field, by his sheep” (*Ibid.*). The Targum Yonasan ben Uziel identifies this messenger as his son, the swift-footed Naftali (*Bereishis 31:4*).

Now, this should have been a somewhat sensitive selection; after all, Naftali was the son of Bilhah, one of the wives who was not invited to the meeting. Why wasn't Ya'akov concerned that Naftali would be offended on his mother's behalf? From the fact that he did in fact select Naftali, it must be that Ya'akov was confident that no ill-feelings would surface. But how could he be so sure?

R' Yitzchak Zilberstein explains that Ya'akov was intimately familiar with his children's characters. Naftali owed a great debt of gratitude to Rachel, for it was at her behest that Ya'akov married Bilhah – who subsequently gave birth to Naftali. In essence, then, Naftali owed his life to Rachel. Ya'akov thus knew that – unlike Lavan's offspring – his children were accomplished in the *middah* of *hakaras hatov*. Thus he knew that Naftali would bear only the most positive feelings towards Rachel and could fulfill the mission without incident or ill-will (*Aleinu L'shabei'ach, parshas Vayeitzei, Bereishis 31:1*).

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