

## This Week's Parshah - Parshas Yisro

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of

Yetta Pessil *bas* Hershel *a"h*

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

### Privileged Information

R' Itzele Volozhiner – who succeeded his father, R' Chaim, as *rosh yeshivah* of Volozhin – often had to appear in the royal halls of power to intercede on behalf of his oppressed brethren. On one of these excursions, he was asked the following by a certain Russian official:

The familiar psalm (*Tehillim 117*) states: ...לְגוֹיִם שִׁבְחוּהוּ כָּל־הַיָּמִים, כִּי גָבַר עָלֵינוּ חַסְדּוֹ... “Laud Hashem, all nations; praise Him, all peoples; for He has wrought great kindness upon us...” The verse enjoins the nations to praise Hashem. Why? “For He has performed great kindness to *us* (i.e., the Jewish people)!” Is this a satisfactory explanation? The nations of the world should sing Hashem’s praises for the kindness He performs for the Jews?

Before proceeding to the answer, let us first explore some fundamental principles regarding Divine Justice. This background will help us to better appreciate R' Itzele’s response.

### Front-Row Seat

The Mishnah in Sotah (*1:7*) encapsulates Hashem’s method in dealing with His creatures:

בְּמִדָּה שֶׁאָדָם מוֹדֵד, בָּהּ מוֹדֵדִין לוֹ.

“According to the measure of a person’s actions – that is how Hashem metes out recompense.”

This notion of Divine reciprocity is commonly referred to as *midah k'neged midah* (measure for measure). Not only does a person receive reward or punishment for his actions, but the nature of the compensation will resemble the characteristics of the deed. For example, one who dispensed much charity may be blessed with great wealth; a murderer who drowned his victims may very well find himself one day at the bottom of a river (*cf. Avos 2:6*).

This concept was manifest throughout the saga of the Exodus. B'nei Yisrael had for so long languished under the nation that had brutally enslaved them; their Egyptian tormentors devised numerous stratagems to afflict their Hebrew subjects. When the era of retribution arrived, the Jews were able to perceive this aspect of Hashem’s justice in the various plagues and punishments that befell their overlords. For example, the Jews had been forced to draw water from the Nile to provide their masters’ water needs. When the river turned into blood, it was clearly recognizable how the punishment was fitting: the Mitzrim’s entire water supply was neutralized (*R' Bachya*). And so it was with each plague; every detail of the Egyptians’ suffering was Divinely calculated to match the nature and magnitude of their nefarious crimes.

However, the Jews’ ability to identify the incidences of *midah k'neged midah* had its limitations. The Brisker Rav points out that – while they were able to understand many of the events “plaguing” their former oppressors – there were still numerous times when the *midah k'neged midah* aspect of a particular punishment was less

apparent. The reason for their lack of insight was quite understandable; they knew only of the Egyptian decrees that had actually been carried out. But Hashem held the Mitzrim accountable not only for those ideas that came to fruition, but even for those designs that (for one reason or another) never got past the planning stage. Since B'nei Yisrael were never privy to these (aborted) plots, they couldn't know when a Mitzri was receiving punishment that fit his mere evil thoughts.

There was, however, one individual who was capable of noting even these “hidden” aspects of *midah k'neged midah*. This was none other than the protagonist of this week's *parshah* – Yisro. Chazal tell us (*Sotah 11a*) that earlier in his career, Yisro was one of Pharaoh's advisers. Before deciding to distance himself from Egypt's rotten scheme, he had been present for the deliberations. As such, he was aware of all parts of the plan, even those that were never implemented. This is one of the reasons he was so shaken and astounded by the events of *yetzias* Mitzrayim. Like no one else, he was able to perceive – down to the last detail – every aspect of Hashem's perfect justice. He recognized how the Egyptians received exact retribution, corresponding not only to their overt actions, but to their hidden designs, as well.

### Nocturnal Visit

Against this backdrop, the Brisker Rav supplies R' Itzele's response to the Russian minister: “You thought it strange,” R' Itzele explained, “that the gentiles are expected to laud Hashem for the kindness He extends to the Jews. But it is specifically *you* who are most capable of rendering this praise. The Jewish people witness deliverance from their enemies – but only from those threats of which they were aware. Only you know the numerous schemes concocted at the highest levels of power to rain harm upon the Jews – plans that have often been inexplicably thwarted (thanks to Divine protection), but whose details have been suppressed from the public. Who better to praise Hashem for these deliverances than the very ones who promulgated the plots? They are the only witnesses to their failure” (*Chidushei HaGriz al HaTorah*; cf. *Mishnas Chayim, parshas Tzav, 5770*)!

There is a well-known incident to this effect, recorded not only in the sacred volumes, but in the archives of Czarist Russia. The event centered upon the activities of the notoriously anti-Semitic Czar Nikolai, who was indefatigable in his efforts to persecute his Jewish subjects. Czar Nikolai expended much time and toil devising harsh decrees aimed at decimating the Jews.

But he began to notice something. It seemed that each time, at the conclusion of a parliamentary session dedicated to the formulation of these wicked decrees, the matter would somehow be dropped. An extensive private investigation uncovered that intervention – and some well-placed bribes from Jewish activists – were responsible for curtailing his ministers' effectiveness.

Czar Nikolai decided to stave off this “rail-roading” once and for all. He convened his officials and issued strict instructions. This time, the ministers were to work on the anti-Jewish legislation throughout the night; they could not even leave the hall. To ensure compliance, Czar Nikolai announced that he would personally appear at 3:00 in the morning to sign the decree.

The ministers were quite surprised at 2:00 a.m. by a sudden commotion; it seemed that the Czar and his royal entourage had chosen to make an inspection one hour before the deadline. Imagine their surprise when the Czar picked up the documents and tore them to shreds before their very eyes! After this bewildering and quite visible spectacle, the ministers understood that it was time to call it quits, and home they went.

The Czar appeared, as scheduled, at 3:00 a.m., eager to sign the long-awaited decree. But he was astounded by what he found: an empty parliament building! After conferring with the few attendant guards who remained, he was apprised of the unlikely events: apparently, some likeness of the Czar himself had just one hour earlier come and destroyed the legislation.

Shocked and dismayed, the Czar was heard to mutter: “The G-d of Israel neither sleeps nor slumbers” (*She’al Avicha V’yagedcha, I, 301-2*)