

PARSHA VA'EIRA

JANUARY 9TH, 2016
TEVET 28TH 5776

629



THE GREATNESS OF THE VIRTUE OF GRATITUDE

Rabbi David Pinto Chlita

The L-RD said to Moses, ‘Say to Aaron: Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt’ (Ex 7:19). Why is Aaron responsible for this? Because, our Sages tell us, the river protected Moses when he was cast into it (Shemot Rabba 9:9). Is it appropriate to throw a rock into a well that we drank water from (Bava Kama 92b)?

In one of his books, Rabbi Nathan Tzvi Finkel of Slabodka writes that it was in this way that our Sages behaved, throughout the generations. He cites as an example the case of the Rif, who was opposed to the sale of a public bath that he used (Shitah Meubetzeth). It was the Sages who taught this vision of things, as we see in Midrash Tanhuma: “Why were the water and sand struck by Aaron? Rabbi Tanhum says: The Holy One, blessed be He, told Moses, ‘It is not proper that you strike the waters that saved you when you were thrown into the river, or the sand that protected you when you killed the Egyptian’” (Tanhuma Va’eira 14).

Another Midrash recounts that Moses himself was requested to strike the waters: “‘Where do the Egyptians get their water to drink?’ asked the Holy One. Moses replied, ‘From the Nile.’ G-d ordered him: ‘Turn it into blood.’ Moses replied, ‘I cannot do so. Does a person who drinks water from a well throw a stone into it?’” (Shemot Rabba 20a).

The transformation of the river to blood and the sand to lice, which was something of a miracle, certainly contributed to demonstrating the Eternal’s greatness, and through this to have encouraged the Children of Israel to believe in Him. But these miracles also contributed to strengthening in Moses his trait of gratitude. Thus, our Sages say, when the Eternal said to Moses, “And now, go and I will dispatch you to Pharaoh” (Ex 3:10), Moses replied, “Master of the universe, I cannot do so because Jethro opened wide his home to me. He considers me as his son. I can’t show myself to be ungrateful” (Shemot Rabba 4:2). Rabbi Nathan Tzvi comments on this in one of his books and states, “This is a strange remark. How could Moses, on whom depended the deliverance of the Children of Israel, the liberation from Egyptian enslavement, the giving of the Torah, the entry of Israel into the Holy Land, the construction of the Holy Temple – how could he refuse this Divine mission simply to avoid seeming ungrateful?”

It is because, as we have read, the one who shows himself ungrateful towards someone who has done him good ends up by renouncing the existence

G-d Himself. This is what Moses feared. What would his mission have been worth if he had not shown his gratitude towards Jethro, a man who not only opened his home to him, but also gave him his daughter in marriage? This is the reason why Moses didn’t give in. What’s more, if he had consented, the example of gratitude that he would have provided, in his capacity as leader, would have been more than suspect.

Can one say as much for Jacob? Arriving at Laban’s without a thing (since Eliphaz, Esau’s son, had completely robbed him – cf. Sefer Hayashar, Vayeitzei), he lived with him for many years and married his two daughters. Then suddenly, “he fled with all he had” (Gen 3:21). Didn’t Jacob remember that despite his father-in-law’s great wickedness, he had opened wide the doors of his home to him (Bereshith Rabba 70:6) and even saved him from Esau? Why then didn’t Jacob show any gratitude towards him?

If we look a little more closely, the reason is because our Patriarch owed absolutely nothing to Laban, since Laban had only been thinking of himself. Why, for example, did he hug and kiss Jacob (Gen 29:13)? It was because, our Sages tell us, Laban thought that Jacob had brought with him some money, gold, or precious stones, and that he kept them in his pockets or his mouth (Bereshith Rabba 70:13). However, when Laban found nothing, he told Jacob, “Is it because you are my brother that you should serve me for free?” (Gen 29:15). It is as if he said, “I won’t welcome you in my house for more than a month.” The Yalkut Meam Loez reports that during his stay with him, Laban would throw bones to Jacob, as with a dog, and Laban did this in spite of everything that Jacob had done to protect Laban’s flocks.

Thus Laban didn’t help Jacob at all, but on the contrary, he wanted to exploit and rob him to the hilt. Laban even thought of killing him, as it is written, “An Aramean tried to destroy my forefather” (Deut 26:5). And even if he didn’t succeed, “among the nations, an evil intention is considered as an act” (Kiddushin 40a). As a result, all this proves that Laban sought only to harm him.

Commenting on the teaching of our Sages that states: “Do not throw a stone into the well from which you drank,” Rabbi Eliyahu Desler writes in his book Michtav MeEliyahu, “How can a well, which is lifeless, feel any sense of ingratitude that is shown it? One can even ask this question with respect to the sand that had saved Moses’ life. Furthermore, it would be necessary to realize that the blows that struck the water and the sand

Publication of
HEVRAT PINTO
 Under the Direction of
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transformed them into tools destined to sanctify G-d's Name. How can one thus speak of humiliation?" (Michtav MeEliyahu, pp.100-101; cf. Messilat Yesharim, end of ch.1).

It is because in all of creation, the mineral and vegetable realms daily proclaim that it is the Holy One, blessed be He, Who created them with a predetermined goal, be it for men to benefit from or simply for the glory of G-d. The one who derives pleasure from it must always thank G-d from having created them. This is what all of creation does, teaches the Talmud: "All was created for man ..." (Sanhedrin 37a). Thus, their use in a miracle brings with it a sanctification of G-d's Name in the world, but when man treats with contempt that which brings him pleasure, he expresses in this way ingratitude. He ends up by expressing ingratitude not to the inanimate object, but to his Creator (see Kohelet

Rabba 7:4; Mechilta Shemot 20). All the more reason, then, that a man should show his gratitude to his neighbor, a being that senses pain if humiliated and is filled with gratitude when pleased. If a person becomes accustomed to not looking down on G-d's creation, he will then respect man, who is made in His image, and will end up by not disparaging the benefits that the Eternal Himself bestows.

To look at this more closely, one sees that the Creator is the source of all causes. When a man is in need of something and G-d sends it to him indirectly (that is, through someone else), if the beneficiary does not show his gratitude towards him, it's as if he demonstrates his ingratitude towards G-d. It's therefore appropriate to instill in our hearts the virtue of gratitude.

In Memory Of The Tzaddikim

Rabbi Shimon HaTzaddik (the Righteous) was one of the last survivors of the Knesset Hagedolah (the Great Assembly), a group composed of 120 men of Israel. On the day after the destruction of the first Beth Hamikdash (Temple), it was the Knesset Hagedolah that did so much to assure the survival of the Jewish nation, a nation that was threatened as much by the disappearance of the Beth Hamikdash as by the Galut (exile) that ensued. It is to them that we owe, in particular, our ritual of prayer, say the Sages in citing the prophet Hosea: "Let our lips substitute for bulls." Counted among those in that Knesset Hagedolah were great members of the community, including even some of the prophets. Rabbi Shimon HaTzaddik himself was the Kohen Gadol (High Priest) in the Beth Hamikdash. He held this office for forty years, attired in his solemn blue garments, and by virtue of his immensely pious works, many were the miracles that the Jewish people benefited from. What follows is an account of one of these miracles, thanks to which the Beth Hamikdash was saved from destruction by the Samaritans, a group that also wanted to massacre the Jewish population of the land. The Eternal, however, put an end to this sinister plan and punished the Samaritans as they deserved. This entire story is recounted in the Talmudic tractate Yoma.

Our Sages teach us: The 25th of Tevet is a Yom Tov (a holiday). On that day we are not allowed to give eulogies or recite Tachnun (bi-weekly supplications). On that day, in fact, the Samaritans had asked for and obtained from Emperor Alexander the Great the authorization to destroy the House of the Eternal in Jerusalem. The terrible news was told to Rabbi Shimon HaTzaddik. What did he do? He dressed himself in his High Priest garments and called for several notable figures in Jerusalem. Each took a lit torch and they all marched during the night to encounter the Emperor, who was on his way to Jerusalem with his retinue. In the morning they found themselves face to face with his procession.

His court attendants announced to the Emperor: "Here are the Jews that have arisen against you."

Yet in seeing Shimon HaTzaddik, Alexander the Great hastened to descend from his chariot and prostrate himself before him. Stunned, his court attendants asked him, "A great king such as you bows down before Jews?"

Rabbi Shimon The Righteous

He replied, "I saw the face of this man when I was in the midst of battle. It was thanks to that vision that I triumphed over my enemies."

Then, turning towards Rabbi Shimon HaTzaddik and his companions, he asked them why they had come to meet him. Rabbi Shimon replied, "Is it conceivable that idolaters could manage to persuade you to destroy a building in which we never stop praying for you and the longevity of your Empire?"

"Of what are you speaking?"

"The Samaritans."

Cognizant of his error, Alexander the Great told them, "They are in your hands. Do with them as you wish."

Immediately, the heads of the community seized the conspirators, attached them to the tails of their horses, and dragged them among prickly shrubs and thistles all the way to their villages on Mount Gerizim. There, they destroyed everything in their path, exactly as the Samaritans had planned to do to Jerusalem.

Since that time, the 25th of Tevet has been decreed as a festival among the Jewish people.

Eishet Chayil

Shabbat Candles – Part V

Does One Accept Shabbat Upon Lighting?

23. Certain authorities believe that as soon as a woman lights the Shabbat candles, she has explicitly accepted Shabbat and can no longer work from that moment on. In addition, it is forbidden for her to eat or drink until after Kiddush. However, the majority of authorities are of the opinion that accepting Shabbat does not depend on lighting, and consequently women have the right to continue working and eating after lighting, and this until sundown. This is the essential part of the Halachah. It is good for women to state this point by clarifying that they don't accept Shabbat by lighting. It is sufficient for them to state this condition once a year. This rule is also valid among the Ashkenazim, who are accustomed to accepting Shabbat by lighting.

The Moral of the Story

Give Me One Proof

A Teaching of the Maggid of Dubno

“When Pharaoh speaks to you, saying, ‘Provide a wonder for yourselves,’ you shall say to Aaron, ‘Take your staff and cast it down before Pharaoh – it will become a snake!’” (Ex 7:9).

When Hashem ordered Moses and Aaron to ask Pharaoh to let the Jewish people go from Egypt, He warned them that Pharaoh could perhaps demand a proof that they were really His messengers.

Our Sages question whether Pharaoh was right to ask this. One opinion agrees with him. The Maggid of Dubno explains Pharaoh's approach with a parable.

Daniel worked for Reb Shimon, and the latter had a close friend by the name of Reb Monish, a man who was very rich. Whenever Reb Shimon quickly needed some money for a business deal, he would always send Daniel to Reb Monish to get a loan. In fact, Reb Monish knew Daniel as well as Reb Shimon himself. He had complete trust in him and always hastened to help him.

Daniel once had to leave town for several weeks because of a family wedding. It was very difficult for Reb Shimon to get by without him, so he hired a young man to come and help him. Abraham, his new employee, was quick to learn and put all his efforts into performing every task required of him.

One day Rabbi called him and said, “Go to Reb Monish and ask him to lend me 400 crowns. Tell him that I will get it back to him before the end of the week.”

Abraham left as soon as possible. Arriving at Reb Monish's office, he asked to speak to him in person.

“I am Reb Monish,” declared a rather tall man seated behind a desk. “What can I do for you?”

“Reb Shimon has sent me to receive a loan of 400 crowns. He guarantees that he will reimburse you, with the help of G-d, before the end of the week.”

Surprised, Reb Monish stared at Abraham in silence. Who was this person? Where was Daniel? Was this young man trying to trick him by taking the money for himself? Was he really Reb Shimon's messenger?

On one hand, he didn't want to embarrass Abraham by showing that he suspected him. On the other hand, it was crazy to trust a stranger.

All of a sudden, Reb Monish had an idea that wouldn't hurt anyone.

“Could you show me a written proof for this request?” he inquired.

“A letter?” exclaimed Abraham, surprised. “Reb Shimon didn't give me one. No, really, I don't have one.”

“Perhaps he forgot. It would be best for you to go and ask for one.”

Abraham left immediately.

“A letter!” exclaimed Reb Shimon for his part, his eyebrows frowning. “He's never asked me for one in the past! I want to hear it with my own ears.”

Reb Shimon quickly put on his coat and hurriedly made his way towards the office of his friend.

“Reb Monish! What is happening?” he cried as he entered, not calming down. “What has changed between today and the other days when you loaned me money without hesitation? Did I act improperly towards you that you no longer trust me?”

“Reb Shimon, don't get upset!” replied Reb Monish, as he tried to calm him down. “Of course our relationship is as friendly as ever. But if I know you, the same cannot be said about your new employee. I don't recall ever having met him. Also, I had no reason to believe him when he said that you had sent him. He asked me for 400 crowns and specified that you would commit yourself to pay me back very soon. I know Daniel. I know that he works for you. But I don't know anything about this individual. That is why I demanded a letter.”

“I understand,” said a calmed Reb Shimon. “You are perfectly right. Moreover, your behavior is reasonable and I thank you for it.”

Moses and Aaron appeared before Pharaoh for the first time by presenting themselves as the messengers of Hashem.

“Afterwards Moses and Aaron came and said to Pharaoh, ‘So said the L-RD, the G-d of Israel: Send out My people that they may celebrate for Me in the wilderness.’ Pharaoh replied, ‘Who is the L-RD that I should heed His voice to send out Israel? I do not know the L-RD, nor will I send out Israel!’” (Ex 5:1-2).

The Midrash teaches us that Pharaoh had under his control all the nations of the world. He was familiar with all the idols worshipped by various peoples, but he didn't know the Name of Hashem.

This explains Pharaoh's reaction.

“Who is Hashem?” he asked. “I have never heard of Him. He doesn't appear on my list. I will therefore never let Israel go.”

Pharaoh needed a sign, some proof that it was really Hashem that directs the world.

Hashem therefore specified the following to Moses and Aaron: “When Pharaoh speaks to you, saying, ‘Provide a wonder for yourselves,’ you shall say to Aaron, ‘Take your staff and cast it down before Pharaoh – it will become a snake!’” (Ex 7:9).