

Mussar HaTorah

Torah Insights into Human Nature – Dedicated in memory of Rabbi A. Henach Leibowitz zt"l

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Parashas Matos

“AND MOSHE SENT THEM ... AND PINCHAS...” (BAMIDBAR 31:6)

Do not throw stones into a well from which you have drunk

MOSHE SENT PINCHAS to lead the army of B'nei Yisrael against the nation of Midyan, to exact Hashem's revenge for their causing the Jews to sin at Ba'al Pe'or. The Midrash Rabbah (Bamidbar 22:4) points out that even though Hashem commanded Moshe to attack Midyan, Moshe sent others in his stead. This, explains the Midrash, was because Moshe had lived in Midyan and it would have been inappropriate for him to hurt those who had previously helped him. The Midrash's parable: Do not throw stones into a well from which you have drunk. The commentary Mahrzu (ibid.) compares this incident to the plague of blood, where Moshe did not hit the water himself because it had saved him as a baby when his mother put him afloat in the Nile River.

It is certainly an insight that we must have appreciation for people – and even inanimate objects – that help us unintentionally or even against their will. The Nile River did not intend or want Moshe to survive. So too, the general Midyanite population did not aim to help Moshe; they merely allowed him to live in Midyan. This is also similar to the parable of the well, as the water does not offer itself to one who is thirsty, but rather is passively drawn up to the person who drinks. Nevertheless, Hashem expected Moshe (and expects us) to show appreciation for an involuntary kindness, too.

Forty years had elapsed

Upon further study, Moshe's gratitude to Midyan would still seem unfounded. Forty years had elapsed since Moshe lived in Midyan. Within the last few months, the elders of Midyan, together with Moav, arranged to have Bilaam curse B'nei Yisrael. The Midyanite princess Kozbi publicly sinned with Zimri. It was Midyan's advice enabled the daughters of Moav to entrap B'nei Yisrael in the grave sins of immorality and idolatry, causing a plague that killed 24,000 Jews. Every Jew lost was a student of Moshe Rabbeinu, beloved to him like his own child. In fact, had Pinchas not have taken action, the entire Jewish nation would have been destroyed because of Midyan's deceit. Would any of us think that gratitude would be appropriate to such wicked enemies? Wouldn't these recent actions of horrible evil erase any fleck of good they might have unintentionally done 40 years earlier?

It is not a rewards or mileage program with conditions and expiration dates

Hakaras haTov – gratitude – is not a matter of points on a scorecard. It is not a rewards or mileage program with conditions and expiration dates. Our obligation to appreciate a benefit received from others is an absolute requirement that never gets cancelled out by subsequent misdeeds or the passage of time. The Navi Yirmiyahu (2:2) says that Hashem remembers our “kindness” in following Him into the desert as a young nation leaving Egypt. The Ohr Ha-Chaim (Vayikra 26:45) explains that this applies to benefit the final generation before the redemption. Despite our many sins throughout the Exile and the thousands of years that have elapsed, this one *chesed* is still appreciated by Hashem. May we emulate our Creator and always be grateful for every kindness, intentional or not, and despite any negative actions done to us by those same benefactors. This will guarantee a life of happiness and never-ending appreciation for the many blessings we constantly receive.