
פרשת וארא

פרק ז פסוק יט

וַיֹּאמֶר יְ-הוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה אָמַר אֶל-אַהֲרֹן קַח מַטְּךָ וּנְטֵה-יָדְךָ עַל-מֵימַי מִצְרַיִם
עַל-גְּהֵרָתָם עַל-יְאֻרֵיהֶם וְעַל-אֲגַמֵּיהֶם וְעַל כָּל-מִקְנֵה מִימֵיהֶם וַיְהִי-יָדָם וַיְהִי דָם
בְּכָל-אֲרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וּבְעֵצִים וּבְאֲבָנִים:

רש"י

אָמַר אֶל אַהֲרֹן: לְפִי שְׁהַגֵּן הַיָּאֹר עַל מֹשֶׁה כְּשֶׁנִּשְׁלַף לְתוֹכוֹ לְפִיכָּךְ לֹא לָקָה עַל יָדוֹ
לֹא בָדָם וְלֹא בְצַפְרֵדָעִים, וְלָקָה עַל יְדֵי אַהֲרֹן.

מושג

לְפִי שְׁהַגֵּן הַיָּאֹר עַל מֹשֶׁה כְּשֶׁנִּשְׁלַף לְתוֹכוֹ לְפִיכָּךְ לֹא לָקָה עַל יָדוֹ.

Translation:

Since the Nile protected Moshe when he was cast into it, it therefore was not struck by his hand¹.

Explanation:

The Pasuk teaches an incredibly important lesson in *הכרת הטוב*, recognizing good. When we recognize that someone has done us a favor we feel compelled to repay. By minimizing the favor we lessen the need to repay. Therefore, the Torah commands us to recognize the good done to us, even by inanimate objects, or even if the person did not have our good in mind at all, in order to train ourselves to never minimize the goodness of others.

Looking in the Pasuk:

Rashi questions why Hashem involves Aharon in the bringing of the *מכות*? After all, Moshe had been told that he would bring Hashem's wonders on *מצרים* with his staff, (ד:יז) *וְאֶת-הַמַּטֵּה הַזֶּה תִקַּח בְּיָדְךָ אֲשֶׁר תַעֲשֶׂה-בּוֹ אֶת-הָאֲתָת (ד:יז)*, why is he being told to delegate to Aharon²? Rashi, quoting the Tanchumah answers that Moshe was instructed not to strike the Nile in the first two *מכות*, nor the sand of Egypt in the third, since they had assisted in saving his life.

Musag Learning Outcomes:

Know: Moshe could not strike the Nile (nor the sand of Egypt) because it had protected him. This teaches us the extent of the obligation to show *הכרת הטוב*.

Understand: The fundamental aspect of teaching people to show gratitude is in teaching them to fully recognize the good done for them. Once the extent of the favor is fully understood, the next step, repaying the favor, will be forthcoming.

Think: Looking at a Pasuk in the context of previous Pesukim helps us better understand the words of *הז"ל*.

1 See note #1

2 See note #2

NOTES

1. This is the first of three מכות in which Hashem tells Moshe to instruct Aharon to bring the plague. The reason that Moshe was not act, explains Rashi, is that Moshe was compelled to show הכרת הטוב towards the Nile (and later to the sand in Egypt) for they had assisted in saving Moshe's life. Rashi's source is found in the מדרש תנחומא³ which teaches:

ומפני מה לקו המים והעפר ע"י אהרן? שכך כתיב אמור אל אהרן קח מטך וגו'. א"ר תנחומא א"ל הקדוש ברוך הוא למשה המים ששמרוך בשעה שהושלכת ליאור, ועפר שהגין עליך כשהרגת את המצרי אינו דין שילקו על ידיך לפיכך לקו על ידי אהרן.

Although Rashi here only mentions the first two plagues, דם וצפרדע, he does so only due to the fact that he is speaking about the Moshe not striking the Nile. Indeed, later in רש"י פסוק יב Rashi comments:

לא הנה העפר כדאי ללקות על ידי משה, לפי שהגן עליו כשהרג את המצרי ניטמנהו בחול (לעיל ב:יב), וְלָקָה עַל יְדֵי אַהֲרֹן.

What is extraordinary here is that Moshe is told to show appreciation to inanimate objects! Both the Nile and the sand of Egypt did not go out of their way to help Moshe, nor make any conscious decision to assist him; why would Moshe be compelled to show appreciation?

Perhaps the most extreme example of הכרת הטוב is found in פרשת שמות when the daughters of יתרו refer to the man who saved them from the shepherds as an איש מצרי. The Midrash wonders why they would refer to him as such:

ותאמרנה איש מצרי הצילנו מיד הרועים, וכי מצרי היה משה? אלא לבושו מצרי והוא עברי. ד"א איש מצרי - משל לאחד שנשכו הערוד (סוג של נחש שצריכים לטבול מקום הנשוד במים או ימות) והיה רץ ליתן רגליו במים, נתנן לנהר וראה תינוק אחד שהוא שוקע במים, ושלח ידו והצילו, אמר לו התינוק אילולי אתה כבר הייתי מת! אמר לו לא אני הצלתיך אלא הערוד שנשכני וברחתי הימנו הוא הצילך, כך אמרו בנות יתרו למשה יישר כחך שהצללתנו מיד הרועים, אמר להם משה אותו מצרי שהרגתי הוא הציל אתכם, ולכך אמרו לאביהן איש מצרי, כלומר מי גרם לזה שיבא אצלנו איש מצרי שהרג. (שמות רבה (וילנא) פרשת שמות פרשה א)

The Midrash explains that Moshe, upon being thanked by the daughters of Yisro for saving their lives, instructs them to thank instead the איש מצרי⁴ who had beaten the Jewish slave. Moshe, had killed that איש מצרי which touched off a series of events which eventually culminated with Moshe being in the right place at the right time to save the daughters of Yisro. But why thank the איש מצרי? Not only was he not actively trying to assist Moshe, his intentions were evil, mercilessly beating a defenseless slave! For this he is to be thanked?

In order to fully understand we must first explain why חז"ל refer to the showing of appreciation as הכרת הטוב, literally translated as recognizing good. Wouldn't repaying good be a more appropriate term? After all, if one recognizes good but does nothing to repay his or her benefactor, have they fulfilled their obligation? Also, in the negative, חז"ל refer to not repaying good as כפוי טוב, literally meaning to cover up or deny good. Should it not be called simply non-payment of good. Again, is it not possible that one may recognize good, not deny or cover it up, but still do nothing towards repayment? Why does it seem that the only obligation is to recognize the favor, and the only problem is to deny the favor?

The above question ignores a very basic aspect of human nature. When one is the recipient of a favor from another, he or she feels immediately obligated to repay that favor. However, if for whatever reason they do not wish to repay the favor, they do not simply decide to ignore the favor, as this runs contrary to the natural feelings of obligation, rather they justify their lack of action by denying or significantly minimizing the favor. In truth, many people who receive help from others are very uncomfortable with the ensuing feelings of need-to-repay. Thus, their first thought is to say, "It wasn't really that big a deal".

The major focus, therefore, is to ensure that one truly recognizes the good that others do. Once we are taught to truly recognize, to be מכיר טוב, then the resulting gratitude is almost automatic. Therefore, חז"ל stressed the need to recognize the good and not to cover it up. Once this is achieved the rest is fairly simple.

3 מדרש תנחומא (ורשא) פרשת ורא סימן יד

4 וְרָא אִישׁ מִצְרִי מִכָּה אִישׁ עֲבָרִי מֵאֲחֵיו: שמות ב:יא

With this in mind we now understand why Moshe is not allowed to strike the Nile nor the sand of Egypt. For the object in teaching הטוב הכרת is not in the giving but in the recognizing. Therefore, even if the benefactor does not truly deserve the gratitude, as was certainly the case in the Egyptian who beat the Jew, it is incumbent on the recipient to recognize the favor. Only when we are trained to pay close attention to every detail of the favor can we truly hope to repay the good receive from others and from Hashem.

2. This point becomes even more powerful when we realize that Hashem had just told Moshe to go to פרעה with his staff and tell him that with this staff I will strike the Nile:

טו לך אל־פרעה בפֶּקֶר הַנֵּה יֵצֵא הַמַּיִמָּה וְנִצְבְּתָ לְקִרְאָתוֹ עַל־שֵׁפֶת הַיָּאֵר וְהַמַּטֵּה אֲשֶׁר־נִהַפְּפָה לְנַחֵשׁ תִּקַּח בְּיָדְךָ⁵: יז פֶּה אָמַר ה' בְּזֹאת תִּדְעֶ כִּי אֲנִי ה' הַנֵּה אֲנֹכִי מִכָּה בַּמַּטֵּה אֲשֶׁר־בְּיָדִי עַל־הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר בַּיָּאֵר וְנִהְפְּכוּ לְדָם:

We could just imagine Moshe standing with his staff in hand ready to fulfill Hashem's command to strike the Nile and bring the first מכה, when he is told that things would happen differently. The Torah seems to be stressing the fact that the plague should have, could have and would have been brought by Moshe, however the obligation to be טוב מכיר overrode all other considerations.

3. Questions for further discussion:

- a. Which other Mitzvos are based on the principle of הטוב הכרת?
- b. Can you think of other examples in Tanach where we are instructed to show הטוב הכרת even to inanimate objects, or to those who actually sought to harm us?
- c. Why does the Torah go to such lengths to stress the importance of הטוב הכרת?

5 It is rather clear that this does not refer to Aharon's staff, as it had turned into a תנין and not a נחש. A point of interest, not in the scope of our discussion, is that one might argue that Moshe actually never uses his staff to bring a plague. A close look at the Pesukim will show that the Torah never says explicitly that Moshe brought a מכה with his מטה.