

PARSHAS KI SEITZEI

תשפ"ב

There is a group of mitzvos in this week's parsha that carries a very deep moral message. It is the mitzvos that determine which geirim can marry into the general Jewish population.

The Torah says that one is not to allow geirim from the nations of Ammon and Moav to marry into the families of Klal Yisroel – ever. Even after the tenth generation. Why? What did they do that was so severe? Because these nations did not extend any hospitality to Klal Yisroel when they were traveling in the desert near their territory. These nations ignored the debt of gratitude they owed to our ancestor Avrohom for saving their ancestor Lot. In addition, Moav hired Bilaam to curse Klal Yisroel, and if not for Hashem's intervention, these curses would have had a serious effect.

And not only can you not allow their geirim to intermarry, you also cannot seek this nation's welfare and give them any kind of assistance for any need they will ever have. This is very extreme.

But when it comes to Edomite and Egyptian geirim, we do not allow these geirim to intermarry until the third generation. This is the prohibition and there is a mitzvas aseil to accept the third generation Edomi and Mitzri when they ask to marry us and we may not reject them because of their yichus to Eisov or Mitzrayim.

The Chovos Halevovos says the foundation of the entire Torah is based on developing the middoh of hakoras hatov. If a person stops and thinks about it, everything he has is from Hashem. Especially a Jew – his exalted life comes from the fact that Hashem took us out of Egypt and took us as His special people. This should naturally give him the feeling of obligation to obey everything the Torah demands.

The Rambam in Moreh Nevuchim doesn't quote this idea of the Chovos Halevovos, but he sees this same fundamental idea coming from these mitzvos. The people of Ammon and Moav identify as descendants of their ancestor Lot. Once they do this, they should automatically be aware of the debt of gratitude they need to have to those who identify as the descendants of Avrohom. Lot owed everything he had to Avrohom. He became wealthy because of his association with Avrohom and then left Avrohom for S'dom. He knew full well how evil they were and he should have been condemned to join their fate. But because of the zechus of Avrohom, Hashem spared Lot and he had children who became the nations of Ammon and Moav. So these nations should always be conscious of this fact and be ready to extend support to Avrohom's descendants.

What is incredible is that Ammon and Moav are expected to continue to have these feeling of hakoras hatov to Klal Yisroel 440 years after these events took place! And the Rambam says that since these nations don't have these feelings ingrained in their national culture after a number of centuries, they are worthless human beings. It shows their deeply corrupt moral character and Klal Yisroel cannot afford to let them join their families!

The yesod of all good middos is hakoras hatov. If you want to appreciate how important this middoh is, see what the Torah said about rejecting the descendants of Ammon and Moav. It doesn't matter how righteous these geirim may be. The slightest violation – not extending hospitality 440 years later – means you lack this basic middoh of what it means to be Jewish.

We must accept the Egyptian convert after three generations. Why? Because Egypt did allow Klal Yisroel to live and prosper in their land.

But this was only while the shevotim were alive – for 127 years – since they felt there was a debt of gratitude to Yosef Hatzaddik whose leadership made Egypt the most wealthy and powerful nation in the ancient world. But then, for the next 83 years, after the new king decided to forget about Yosef, the Egyptians became cruel, sadistic slave-drivers and made Klal Yisroel suffer tremendously. They broke us physically and emotionally – throwing our baby boys into the Nile! But what is our attitude supposed to be? Hakoras hatov for the fact that they took us in to their land and took care of us for 127 years! There may be a lot of evil in their history, and the good they did to us was only because they owed something to Yosef. But we have to separate the good from the bad and keep having hakoras hatov for the good they did for us.

The same goes for Edom – this nation was not always friendly to Klal Yisroel. Hashem told us that when Moshiach comes He will judge Edom for the evil they have done. But because our ancestors were brothers, we cannot reject their geirim from intermarrying after three generations. We see the importance of giving support to our blood relatives – even though the family tree branched off into different nations hundreds of years ago.

Stop and think about what these verses are saying. Ammoni and Moavi geirim want to convert. We let them convert but we leave them on the side. We say they are lacking the critical middoh of hakoras hatov which has corrupted their spiritual DNA permanently. Lacking this middoh makes them defective and unsuitable as marriage partners for the rest of human history!

But then we have the Egyptian convert. He cannot be rejected indefinitely – even though his nation was quite cruel to us. Why? Because WE have to show OUR hakoras hatov to this ger based on what his ancestors did to benefit Klal Yisroel hundreds of years ago.

We have the Edomite convert. He cannot be rejected either, because he is a member of our family going back to Yaakov Ovinu. Even though he did not treat us well at all, and we even have an obligation to wipe out Amoleik because of their evil nature, yet we still have to accept Edom's converts into our families because they are our blood relatives. We cannot place any stigma on him based on his relationship to Edom.

These are a group of mitzvos which teach us how deeply certain middos affect us and shape our personality. Bad middos have to be rejected completely and good middos have to be cultivated to extreme degrees.

There is another mitzvah in the parsha – shiluach haken. It is an interesting mitzvah. A mother bird has a nest and there are either eggs or little birds there. The Torah says you cannot take them from the nest while the mother is present. First send her away and then take the eggs or the young.

The Mishna in Brochos discusses someone who composes a prayer to Hashem: May You have mercy on us just as You have mercy on the mother bird (which you commanded us to send away before taking her young). The halacha is that we silence such a person – this prayer is inappropriate and we cannot daven with such a person. The question is why.

One opinion says it is because it will cause jealousy among Hashem's creations – it makes it appear as though Hashem only has mercy on birds and not any other creature – which is not true. The other opinion

says we silence such a person because the mitzvot of Hashem are decrees and they are not the way Hashem shows His mercy.

Let us look at how the Rambam cites this machlokes and how he treats taamei hamitzvos in general. In Moreh Nevuchim the Rambam says there is no sense in asking any “why” questions about Hashem. Why did Hashem create the sun? You might answer – because people need the sun for light and heat. But then you can ask, why did Hashem create people who need the light and the heat of the sun in the first place. You can keep going back and ask why to every answer you give. So it is not a valid question to ask “why” about what Hashem does.

But we can notice that there is incredible wisdom in the manner in which Hashem set up the creation. All its multiple levels of cause and effect and interactions and co-dependencies between different creatures. A Being who acts and operates with wisdom will never do anything without a purpose in mind. So the appropriate question we can ask and answer is what is the function of this creature? What purpose was it designed to serve in the grand scheme of Hashem’s multi-faceted creation? We see the plant kingdom and the animal kingdom, and we see they are both dependent on each other and each are dependent on the sun. So we can ask what is the reason for the sun’s existence – what role does the sun play in creation? We can answer that one of its’ purposes is to provide light and heat for the creatures living on Planet Earth. Everything supports and depends on everything else and it all functions together. So we can ask, what role does each aspect of creation play in this interdependent system?

The Rambam says the same applies to “why” questions for mitzvot. There is no point in asking or answering “why” Hashem gave this or that mitzvah. Hashem decreed and we must obey. As the gemara in Rosh Hashono says – the reason we blow shofar is because Hashem commanded that we blow shofar.

The Ramban explains that there is a spiritual value for doing every mitzvah – and in addition, we obey each mitzvah as a form of kabbolas ol mitzvot – to show that we submit ourselves to the will of Hashem. Every mitzvah has this exact same purpose.

But you can ask: what specific function, what unique positive effect does this mitzvah have that other mitzvot do not? Hashem is an intelligent Lawgiver and He would not give us a useless mitzvah simply to test our obedience and nothing else. Each mitzvah must also have its own positive unique impact on us as human beings. It must have some kind of ability to shape our minds and our personality in a particular direction that Hashem wants us to grow in. These are the taamei hamitzvos. They don’t try to explain why Hashem commanded it or why we have to obey it. It describes what kind of effect or impact this mitzvah was designed to have on us.

There are different groups of mitzvot and each has its function. There are eidos which are trying to convey certain spiritual ideas or beliefs. There are mishpotim which are necessary for the smooth and orderly functioning of society. And there are chukim which also have a function and an impact on a person, but they are not so obvious and apparent as the other types. The Rambam at the end of Hilchos Me’ilah says we are supposed to reflect on each mitzvah and figure out what the

intended effect is that each mitzvah is supposed to have. Even the mitzvot which seem illogical like tumoh and taharoh have a taam we can appreciate if we think deeply enough about it.

But the person who says Hashem’s command to send away the mother bird is a way of Hashem showing His mercy on the birds, is giving an incorrect reason. If Hashem really wanted to have mercy on birds, or animals in general, He would not allow us to take the birds away from the nest in the first place! We should not be allowed to eat them or use them for any reason!

The truth is that we are allowed to eat animals and use them for our needs. But this mitzvah of sending away the mother is to minimize the pain involved. It is to instill within us a sense of mercy and compassion and not to be excessively cruel when we use animals for our needs and ruin our middos.

There is one answer to the question of why we perform shiluach haken – we do the will of Hashem. But we can see there is a purpose – an effect that the mitzvah has on us. It instills a sense of compassion and it minimizes the cruelty involved in taking animals’ lives. If I have to minimize the suffering of any creature I want to use, this will automatically sensitize me to suffering of others in general. It has nothing to do with being kind to animals.

It is interesting that in Nazi Germany, they had all kinds of laws about kindness to animals. And yet they were capable of slaughtering millions of innocent men, women and children with all kinds of inhumane, cruel methods that you couldn’t imagine. Today, the animal rights movement is largely headed by people who, shall we say, occupy the lower end of the moral scale in general among human beings. It makes you wonder.

What is the difference between our halachic concept of tzaar baalei chayim and the animal rights movement? The difference is that these animal rights activists live their lives like animals and are so lacking in their humanity and tzelem Elokim, that they more closely identify with actual animals. They couldn’t care less about the welfare of actual human beings who still have a tzelem Elokim.

The concept of tzaar baalei chayim isn’t that we identify with animals. It is that the Torah cares about our neshomos and our middos. The goal of tzaar baalei chayim is to raise the sensitivity of our neshomos to the suffering of every creature. It refines our tzelem Elokim and makes us a more spiritual human being who cares about everyone we come into contact with. Yes, we are different than animals and we are superior to animals. We are allowed to eat them and use them for our needs. But we need to be sensitive to their suffering at the same time. If you won’t be sensitive to an animal’s suffering, then you won’t be sensitive to the suffering of other human beings as well.

These mitzvot form a major part of the Torah’s attitudes to middos. There are lessons about the importance of hakoras hatov, of caring for blood relatives, and being sensitive to the suffering of animals. The Torah is trying to refine and develop our personality through these mitzvot. Rav Avrohom Ben HoRambam says every single mitzvah should be used as a derech avodah when you learn the message and the value that each mitzvah is trying to convey.