

# Gratitude from the Torah

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha

## Parashat Vaera

How Does Moshe Teach us to Sharpen our Sensitivity Toward Gratitude?

### Gratitude for the State of Israel that Enabled me to Return to the Torah Path

I'm very grateful to the State of Israel. Yes, you heard me right! I said the State of Israel, not only *Eretz Yisrael* – the Land of Israel – but *Medinat Yisrael* – the State of Israel. I'm outraged at all the Israeli citizens some of them my friends and even some students from a *chareidi* background who bash the State of Israel and make a point of separating their love of Eretz Yisrael from Medinat Yisrael which they abhor. Although I must concede that many atrocities have been done in the name of the State of Israel, especially to the Yemenites in the 1950ties, that doesn't cancel out all the good that the State of Israel has done and continues to do for its inhabitants. For example, from the beginning of the State of Israel, public transportation does not generally run in Jewish-majority cities on Shabbat. The food in Israeli public institutions such as the army, University campus cafeterias, and hospitals all serve kosher food. The government policy even goes as far as banning bringing any food not marked 'Kosher for Pesach' into hospitals during Passover. Non-kosher cookbooks are no longer published in Israel, and esteemed non-kosher chefs are opening kosher restaurants in Israel. Personally, I owe tremendous gratitude to Medinat Yisrael for my becoming a *ba'alat teshuva*, returning to the Torah path. Outside of the Land of Israel, I would have never been exposed to the kind of spirituality that inspired me to live a Torah life. Had Eretz Yisrael not been under Jewish sovereignty, one white paper or another would have made it impossible for me even to place my feet on this holy soil! The Aliyah support that my husband and I received enabled us to both immerse ourselves completely in Torah learning for a considerable amount of time. The *yishuvim* (Jewish settlements) in which we lived was established by the Israeli government, and thanks to the IDF we live much safer in the Holy Land, than the pioneers that settled here before the State of Israel was founded. But most importantly, it was at the Kotel (Western Temple Wall), that I met the people from the Diaspora Yeshiva with whom I found my spiritual home. It is well known that under Jordanian control Jews were completely expelled and banned from praying at the site of the Western Wall. It wasn't much better under the British or the Turks. Had the State of Israel not gained control over the Kotel I would have never been able to kiss the wall and find my way back home from this holiest place on earth. Only after the Israeli authorities established control over the Western Wall site in June 1967, did Jews return to pray at the Western Wall in mass. It was at the Western Wall Plaza created by the Israeli government that I met the Rabbi and student from Diaspora Yeshiva who changed my life.

### Refraining from Bashing the Source of Your Benefit

I'm thankful to my parents for educating me to always write thank you letters to anyone who gave me a gift. Thus, my sense of gratitude to anyone from whom I benefitted has been cultivated within me through my mother's milk. Therefore, I cannot fathom how any Israeli resident who receives running water, electricity, public health service, and army protection from the Israeli government has the nerve to complain and publicly proclaim how they oppose the Israeli state. This viewpoint can be compared to those who hate the police officers who are only doing their job to keep law and order in the city, or to a child who detests the dentist. I'm not saying I always

agree with the politics of the government – I'm still grieving over the expulsion of the vibrant Jewish communities from Gush Katif (Gaza) nearly 20 years ago, but that doesn't affect the general appreciation we must have for the benefits we receive from the State of Israel. Nothing is perfect in this world. Yet, no matter how imperfect, we still owe thanks to anyone and anything through which we ever received benefit. We learn this from Hashem teaching Moshe to refrain from hitting the Nile – that had protected him – to bring about the plagues.

When G-d instructs to activate the plague, it is Aharon, not Moshe, who is instructed to strike the river:

**סַפֵּר שְׁמוֹת פְּרָקֵי זֶ פְּסוּקֵי יְיָ וַיֹּאמֶר הָשֵׁם אֶל מֹשֶׁה אָמַר אֶל אַהֲרֹן קַח מִטֵּב וּנְטֵה יָדְךָ עַל מֵימֵי מִצְרַיִם עַל נְהַרְתָּם עַל יְאֻרֵיהֶם וְעַל אֲגָמֵיהֶם וְעַל כָּל מְקוֹה מֵימֵיהֶם וַיְהִי דָם וַיְהִי דָם בְּכָל אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וּבְאֲבָנִים:**

Hashem said to Moshe, 'Say to Aharon, "Take your staff and stretch forth your hand over the waters of Egypt, over their rivers, over their canals, over their ponds, and all their bodies of water, and they will become blood, and there will be blood throughout the entire land of Egypt, even in wood and in stone"' (*Shemot* 7:19).

This is even though this same Nile that protected Moshe also drowned enumerable Jewish baby boys. Nevertheless, Moshe was expected to show gratitude to the Nile and avoid hitting it due to the personal benefit he had received from it when his life was saved while sailing peacefully in the waters of the Nile as an infant. No matter how much damage the Nile had caused to the Israelites, nevertheless, Moshe was to acknowledge the personal benefit it had granted him by refraining from hitting it. How much more so must we who receive or receive benefits from the State of Israel refrain from condemning it?!

### **Why Did Aharon Hit the Nile Instead of Moshe?**

Why does Aharon strike the Nile instead of Moshe? Since the Nile protected Moses when he was cast into it, it was not struck by him, not with the plague of blood or with frogs, but instead was struck by Aharon. [from *Tanchuma, Va'era* 14](Rashi, *Shemot* 7:19). Similarly, regarding the plague of lice in which the dust of the earth is transformed into lice: It was not right for the earth to be struck by Moshe seeing that it had protected him when he killed the Egyptian (taskmaster) and buried him in the sand (see 2:12). Therefore, it was struck by Aharon (Rashi 8:13). Since the Torah teaches us that it would be inappropriate for Moshe to strike the river that saved his life, and to cause harm to the earth that protected him, we must acknowledge even the inanimate when it has bestowed blessings upon us. How much more so must we be thankful to human beings who have expended effort, care, and attention, extending kindness to us?! Moshe Rabbeinu was commanded by Hashem to go back to Egypt and free the Jews.... Before he left for Egypt, "Moshe went and returned to Yitro, his father-in-law. He asked him, for permission to go, and return to his brothers in Egypt... (*Shemot* 4:18). Moshe's actions here appear strange. How could he hesitate when Hashem Himself had just commanded him to go to Egypt and it was a matter of saving lives? "Moshe had to first get Yitro's permission because Yitro accepted him and opened the door to his house to him and treated him like a son. We owe our soul to anyone who opens his door to us. We are often misled to act quickly "in the name of the mitzvah" and we forget to think about others. Our sensitivity, kindness, and Hakarat Hatov are sacrificed for the sake of these 'mitzvot.'

Hashem wants us to fulfill mitzvot in ways that preserve our middot (character traits). Perhaps He was honing Moshe's sensitivity toward expressing appreciation for his father-in-law by preempting Moshe's sensitivity toward the Nile and the sand of Egypt through the command: "Say to Aharon, 'Take your staff...'" (Based on Rebbetzin Shira Smiles).

### **What is the Purpose of Showing Gratitude to Inanimate Objects?**

It is still hard to understand why Moshe was not allowed to bring about the first three plagues, which entailed smiting the river and the earth because he benefited from the river and the earth. While the importance of 'Hakarat Hatov' – extending gratitude – to people who acted kindly to us makes sense, why should we show gratitude to inanimate objects, like rivers and dust? Would they have been insulted had Moshe afflicted them with plagues? The story is told of a man who had come upon hard times and was forced to sell a bathhouse that he had owned and operated. He approached the Rif (Rabbi Yitzchak of Fez, Morocco) for legal guidance in selling and to ask him to draft the documents so that the sale would be effective and binding according to Halacha. The Rif refused to take part in any aspect of the sale, because he had used the bathhouse on several occasions. As he had derived benefit from the bathhouse, he felt it improper to participate in the process of closing it down. How do we understand this concern for showing gratitude to a bathhouse? Rav Eliyahu Dessler explains that had Moshe struck the river or the earth, this would have diminished – if only slightly – his sensitivity toward the importance of gratitude. The character trait of 'Hakarat Hatov' is so central and so significant that we cannot allow ourselves to lose even the slightest degree of sensitivity to this value. Although the river would not have been affected at all had Moshe struck it with his staff, this might have dulled Moshe's sensitivity toward 'Hakarat Hatov' and the importance of recognizing and feeling grateful for all that others have done for him. The human mind is able to distinguish the importance or entitlement of the recipient. Human emotions, by contrast, cannot. It is irrelevant that our beneficiary might have been an inanimate object. Our emotional reality is that when we strike something, its value is lowered in our eyes. It becomes inferior and we become superior. If we previously benefitted from it, then our middah of Hakarat Hatov certainly diminishes. Expressing gratitude is a vital first step toward feeling gratitude to G-d. If we focus on what we do not have, rather than feeling grateful for what we do have, then we will be bitter and frustrated and never experience contentment. The Torah therefore teaches us the invaluable lesson of ingraining expressing gratitude not only for what other people and G-d do for us but even for the inanimate, so that we can experience true joy and contentment throughout our lives (Rabbi Eli Mansour, *Parashat Va'era: Gratitude*).

### **Gratitude Focus for the Week of Parashat Va'era**

• **Show Appreciation to Everyone and Everything Even if They are Only Doing their Job** – Remember to acknowledge anyone or anything from whom you benefited whether they went out of themselves for you or not. When we benefit from someone, we have a responsibility to recognize that we owe a debt of gratitude. Gratitude is not measured by the benefactor's efforts but by the impact on the recipient. We learn from Moshe's gratitude toward the Nile which negates the attitude among people to say: "Why do I need to say, 'Thank you'? Why do I need to have Hakarat Hatov? –He had to do it anyway!" The proof is that the Nile River did not go out of its way to do anything special for Moshe. It merely floated the basket according to the nature of water and the law of physics that something lighter than water floats on water. Nevertheless, Moshe expressed gratitude to the Nile for doing what water does anyway.

- **Work on Developing Your Sensitivity of Gratitude** – Reflect on someone you love and think of things s/he gave you. It may not be so easy at first. It could take some time. The next level is to reflect on things you've learned about life from your loved ones.
- **Identify Ten Pieces of Wisdom that You Learned** – Think about from where you got them. From a loved one? A teacher? From a friend? A coworker? Then call them, email them, or text them and say “thank you.” They'll feel great and I promise you, your life will be enhanced.