

## Say to Aharon, “Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt.” (7:19)

So begins the Ten Plagues that shook up the underpinnings of Egyptian arrogance and obstinacy. Hashem instructed Aharon to strike the waters; later, he struck the water from which emerged the frogs and then the earth which produced the lice. Why Aharon, and not Moshe? *Chazal* explain that the Nile River had protected Moshe *Rabbeinu* when he was an infant. It would have been wrong for him to serve as the instrument to inflict a plague on it. Likewise, the earth concealed the Egyptian that Moshe had slain. The Torah considers it wrong to show ingratitude even to an inanimate river/earth. How much more so should we be vigilant not to show ingratitude to a human being. In his *Michtav MeiEliyahu*, *Horav Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler, zl*, explains that while it is true that the inanimate object has no feelings, our concern is not for the object; rather, we are concerned that a person acting ungraciously, as the *Talmud* expresses itself, “Do not throw shoes into a well from which you drink,” will negatively affect his subconscious. The well will not feel lacking as a result of the person’s ingratitude, but the man’s character will be diminished as a result of his ingratitude.

*Horav Moshe Abuchatzaira* wonders why Moshe did not show *hakoras hatov*, appreciation/gratitude, to Pharaoh in whose home he had grown up. If Moshe was obligated to be grateful to sand and water, would Pharaoh not inherently be included in the obligation? Nonetheless, Moshe catalyzed the remaining seven Plagues. He explains that this Pharaoh was the *melech chadash*, “new” king, who somehow forgot or did not know Yosef – the man who had saved Egypt. The country, with its millions of citizens, would have perished from hunger had Yosef not organized them. Pharaoh would have been left with nothing. Whatever he had become was attributable to Yosef’s descendants. His excuse: He did not “know” anyone by the name of Yosef. (How quickly our enemies forget the contributions of the Jews’. This scenario has played itself out over and over throughout the ages. Pharaoh was the first to manifest this amnesia, and his many followers throughout history have developed and even embellished this illness.)

To such an ingrate as Pharaoh, we say: “If you do not remember Hashem, Whom you know sent Yosef to help you – then we do not know you, either.” Since Pharaoh showed that gratitude was not a character trait that he valued, Moshe was not obligated to show any appreciation to him.

Alternatively, Pharaoh was a despot who had no respect for human life. He enslaved an entire nation just because he wanted to. He had no rationale behind his decree. *Bnei Yisrael* were no danger to him – much like what has happened to our people throughout the millennia. The fact that he was kind to Moshe, the infant, was because he deferred to his daughter; Moshe and his people meant nothing to him. Such a person deserves no *hakoras hatov*, no form of appreciation. Whether the reason is that Pharaoh was himself a *kafui tov*, ingrate, or that he was a tyrant who had no respect for human life – Pharaoh was not a person who deserved our *hakoras hatov*.

This was the challenge to Nevuchadnetzer: You want to sing a more beautiful song than David

*Hamelech*? Very impressive! However, can you say/sing it like David *Hamelech* – during all situations – even after you have received a Heavenly slap? It was this challenge that Nevuchadnetzer failed.

The *Sokolover Rebbe* looked at his *chassid* and said, “My dear student, in Heaven they saw that you sang *shirah*, that you praised Hashem, during and following times when life was good, when Heaven had overtly smiled on you. Now, they want to see if you are prepared to sing *shirah* and thank Hashem for all that you have left, for all that you had the good fortune to receive in the past. Can you sing *shirah* after you have received Hashem’s slap? You no longer have your wealth. The slap is very painful. Can you still sing? Heaven is awaiting your response!”

The *Rebbe*’s warm and sincere words hit home, and *Reb Kalman* realized that the difficulties he was presently experiencing should neither negate his song nor prevent him from continuing to sing, to pay his gratitude to the Almighty. He kept on singing, and over the next few months, having passed the Heavenly challenge, he saw his wealth return.

Can we say that we act any differently? Do we quickly forget the fellow who helped, sponsored, was there when we were in need – now when he is either unable, or lacks the desire – or we are in better shape? How easy it is to forget. How natural this altogether immoral attitude is. Nonetheless, it is all too common. The question is: Are we prepared to follow David *Hamelech*’s lead, or will we settle to be like Nevuchadnetzar or – worse – like Pharaoh?

It goes without saying that the *middah*, character trait, of *hakoras hatov* is of extreme significance, to the point that it defines one’s humanness. One who is an ingrate is not a *mentsh* – period. Many of us are sadly deficient in one specific aspect of *hakoras hatov*. We fail to recognize that gratitude is an obligation at all times – even when the situation has changed and the favor is no longer occurring. The following story is an example.

*Reb Kalman* was a well-to-do lumber merchant who was generous with his *tzedakah*, charitable contributions. Every economic climate has its ups and downs. Therefore, the fellow who is wealthy today might be a pauper tomorrow – and vice versa. When a fire broke out in *Reb Kalman*’s warehouse, he was reduced to pauper status overnight. With the limited funds that remained in his portfolio, he attempted to invest in varied business startups – all of which failed. *Reb Kalman*’s wealth was history. He was now relegated to living in abject poverty. When a *frum*, observant, Jew sustains such a “message” from Hashem, he goes to his *Rebbe* or *gadol*, Torah giant, to seek an interpretation, advice and guidance. *Reb Kalman* proceeded to *Horav Yitzchak Zelig Sokolov, zl*.

*Reb Kalman* came into his *Rebbe*’s office, loudly bemoaning his miserable circumstances: “*Rebbe*, Help me! I am finished!” The *Rebbe* listened intently with great empathy, and related to him an inspirational *Chazal*. *Chazal* teach (*Sanhedrin 92b*) that following Nevuchadnezer’s conquering of Yerushalayim, the evil king wanted to praise Hashem through *shirah*, song of praise. Indeed, he wanted his song to be able to surpass even David *Hamelech*’s songs of praise – *Sefer Tehillim*. As

soon as he articulated his arrogant request, a *malach*, angel, came and slapped him on the mouth. Nevuchadnetzar immediately stopped.

The *Kotzker Rebbe*, *zl*, wonders why the angel put a swift end to Nevuchadnetzar's *shirah*. If, as he claimed, his song was even more beautiful than that of David *Hamelech*, why not allow him to sing? The *Rebbe* teaches us a powerful lesson. When the angel slapped Nevuchadnetzar's mouth, it was not for the purpose of preventing his *shirah* from being sung; rather, it was a test to ascertain if he would be able to continue singing even after he had been on the receiving end of a Heavenly slap.

David *Hamelech* authored *Sefer Tehillim*, his book of *shirah* to Hashem, reflecting all of life's situations. David *Hamelech*'s life was filled with highs and lows, with triumph and much adversity. From a simple shepherd to *Melech*, King of *Yisrael*, from moments when he was running for his life, to the time when he was ensconced on his royal throne – *Tehillim* reflected his constant and ever ready gratitude to Hashem. He did not turn from Hashem when his bed of roses withered. He always sang his feelings of gratitude and praise.