

"Avenge the Bnei Yisroel against the Midyanites." (31:2)

One of the loftiest character traits which an individual can possess is that of *hakoras hatov* (expression of gratitude). This gratitude has been misconstrued to mean merely a repayment of someone else's benevolent deed. There are many aspects to this attribute. One is that *hakoras hatov* is an obligation by which an individual is duty bound not only to acknowledge the immediate source of benefit, but he is even responsible to discern that which brought about the action of his benefactors, and to express his appreciation to them for their role in his gain. *Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz Zt"l* notes from this *posuk* and related *Midrash* that *hakoras hatov* is so obligatory that even Hashem's Divine command takes on a different meaning when one considers his immediate debts of gratitude. The *Midrash* cites Hashem's command to Moshe to fight Midyon. Moshe, instead chose Pinchas to do so. The *Midrash* explains Moshe's deviation from this command, with the statement "*Since I was made great in Midyon it is not proper that I harm those who were good to me.*" True, Moshe had reason for not harming the Midyonites, but how does he justify his reason which is contrary to the Divine command? The response given is that the duty to fulfill one's obligation of *hakoras hatov* becomes the medium for interpreting Hashem's Divine word. The apparent contradiction between the Divine command and Moshe's choice of Pinchas, is resolved by understanding it to mean "*Avenge the Bnei Yisroel by using an agent.*" Moshe makes this interpretation as resolutely as if he were expounding one of the thirteen Hermeneutic rules for exposition of the *Torah*. The obligation to express one's appreciation to his benefactor gives Moshe an understanding of the true meaning of Hashem's word. This attribute did not negate Hashem's command; on the contrary, it illuminated and revealed its true meaning.

Reb Chaim sums up his thesis that *hakoras hatov* is not merely a debt that we carry, it is rather the will of Hashem. It is a perspective in understanding the word of Hashem. Why do we then find individuals who maintain themselves correctly in so many attributes but fall dismally short in regard to properly acknowledging their benefactors? The answer lies in the definition of the words "*hakoras hatov*". The word "*hakarah*" means "to recognize" or "to perceive". An individual must first be aware that he is the recipient of an act of kindness from someone. Often we rationalize the necessity to express our appreciation to another by belittling the deed performed for us. If we recognize everything that is done for us, then we have the true meaning of *hakoras hatov*. Only then can we properly acknowledge these benefits by conveying our expression of gratitude to all those who benefitted us.