



The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

Vaera: Gratitude

This week, we shall address the topic of thankfulness and gratitude. This is a human virtue that emerges from one small disparity in the biblical text. At the start of the Plague of Blood, God sends Moses to warn Pharaoh:

Go to Pharaoh ... at the edge of the Nile, taking with you the rod that turned into a snake. And say to him: ... I shall strike the water in the Nile with the rod that is in my hand, and it will be turned into blood. (7:15-17)

But when God gives the instruction to activate the plague, it is Aaron, not Moses, who is instructed to strike the river:

Say to Aaron: Take your rod and hold out your arm over the waters of Egypt—its rivers, its canals, its ponds, all its bodies of water—that they may turn to blood. (7:19)

Why does Aaron strike the Nile instead of Moses? Rashi comments:

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 Aaron.

Similarly, 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 Moses 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 Aaron. (Rashi 8:13)

In other words, it would be inappropriate for Moses to strike the river that saved his life, to cause harm to the earth that protected him. When something has bestowed blessings upon us we should acknowledge that.

Now, this perspective is remarkable. I can appreciate that we are indebted and thankful to human beings who have expended effort, care and attention, extending kindness to us. But should I be thankful to the chair I sit on, to the car that I drive? Should we extend our gratitude and appreciation even to inanimate objects?

This is a good point to embark on a discussion:

- Why was it inappropriate for Moses to strike the Nile?
- Does the Nile, which saved Moses, deserve our appreciation? Should I have special respect for my car, my clothing, my home?
- What is the difference between appreciating people and appreciating objects?

To take this further, a Talmudic passage relates to this idea:

Rava said to Rabba bar Mari: What is the source of the saying: “If there is a well that you drank from, do not throw a stone into it”? He replied: “... You shall not abhor an Egyptian, because you were a stranger in his land” ([Deuteronomy 23:8](#)). Since you dwelled in their lands, you may not cause them harm.

- “If there is a well that you drank from, do not throw a stone into it” Why?

Maybe so that others can also drink? Possibly because we should simply value productive, positive elements in the natural world and refrain from harming them, ensure their preservation.

But the proof text is remarkable. Even though the Egyptians enslaved us, we may not “abhor” or hate them, because after all, they did house our people for 400 years! This is an extreme degree of gratitude.

Gratitude can change our lives. Studies have demonstrated that grateful people are happier and more effective.

The 11th century work *Hovot Halevavot* (ch.2) speaks about the tendency not to appreciate our blessings and not to express our thanks. It is because:

1. We quickly get used to our comforts and seek more.
2. We take our life and the people and things around us for granted, our home, a safe neighborhood, our beating heart.
3. We focus on the negative. We notice the mistakes of the people around us, but not the positive things that they do for us.

So, let's do an exercise.

Go around the table and ask everyone to appreciate and thank:

1. A person in their life

2. An object in their life

3. A challenge or difficulty in their life (that is worth appreciating.)

When we practice thanks and gratitude, we find that we become more attentive to the good around us and more appreciative of all the things and acts of assistance and kindness that are extended to us each and every day.

Shabbat Shalom!