

# PARSHAS KI SEITZEI

תשפ"ג

Parshas Ki Seitzei has many details, and we won't go through all of them, but I want to focus on a number of them.

There is one posuk that goes against contemporary culture – as the Torah typically does. It says men cannot wear women's clothing and vice versa. The Torah expects men to appear and act like men and for women to appear and act like women. Boundaries between the two genders may not be crossed or blurred. One cannot pretend to be like the other. This is essential to how Hashem created the world.

Another posuk says the men of Ammon and Moav cannot marry into the regular community of Klal Yisrael – even after they abandon avodo zoro and convert. Even the tenth generation of geirei tzedek.

Why? Because these nations did not approach you offering food and water when you were traveling by their territory, and they even hired Bilaam ben Be'or to curse you. The Rambam in Moreh Nevuchim explains that these nations lack a basic component of what it means to be Jewish – the middoh of hakoras hatov.

These nations owed Klal Yisroel a debt of hakoras hatov because their ancestor Lot owed his very existence to our ancestor Avrohom Ovinu. Lot was the son of Horon. When Horon was burnt in the kivshon ho'aish in Ur Kasdim, Lot decided, like his father, to be practical and stick with the winner. He followed Avrohom Ovinu to Eretz Cana'an. When they come back to Cana'an from Egypt, Lot finds himself very wealthy and it went completely to his head. He lost sight of the fact that it all came from Avrohom. He decided the best place to maximize his wealth is to move away from Avrohom and go to S'dom – which he knew was a deeply corrupt, immoral city.

Hashem needed to destroy the city of S'dom because of how evil they were, and Lot would have been destroyed along with them, if not for the zechus of Avrohom Ovinu. So anything Lot had in this world, especially his two daughters who gave birth to Ammon and Moav, was owed to Avrohom Ovinu. This is the debt of hakoras hatov that these nations owed Klal Yisroel when we left Egypt.

But let us make a simple calculation: This incident which they owed hakoras hatov to us for, happened 440 years before Klal Yisroel came through their land! The Rambam says we see from here that debts of hakoras hatov endure in their full strength throughout time.

These nations were expected to take care of Klal Yisroel and the national culture is judged negatively for all time for failing to do so. It shows how far hakoras hatov goes and how deficient you are by not having this middoh. If you come from such a national culture, you will always be suspect that you lack the necessary hakoras hatov gene. You can never marry into Klal Yisroel because we can't risk introducing this lack of middos into the Jewish community. Stop and think about the lesson of this posuk. The Rambam is telling us that certain middos are absolutely essential to being a Jew.

Rabbeinu Bachyeh says that someone who does not have a well-developed middoh of hakoras hatov cannot have a meaningful relationship with Hashem. Why? When I wake up each morning, I need to appreciate that everything I have comes from Hashem.

Rabbeinu Avrohom ben HoRambam in his Sefer Hamaspik asks, why is one considered a rosho for doing an aveiroh? What is immoral about not listening to Hashem? He answers that if Hashem gives you existence and everything that you have, there is a debt to Hashem that is created. And it is repaid by obeying Him. Someone who doesn't pay

his debts and doesn't listen to Hashem is a rosho.

The whole basis of your relationship with Hashem is that everything you have in this world is a free gift from Hashem. If you don't feel that debt of gratitude – that you received something and therefore you owe something in return, you are missing the most fundamental attitude that underlies the entire Torah.

There is an unbelievably powerful message behind this group of mitzvos in the Torah.

This debt of hakoras hatov doesn't just go one or two generations back. It goes back 400+ years into the past! If a national existence starting with Lot, owes its very being to the national existence starting with Avrohom Ovinu, that creates a national debt which the entire nation of Ammon and Moav must feel obligated to pay back to Klal Yisroel – 400 years later. If they don't feel that debt 400 years later, they are missing a basic component necessary to be a part of the Jewish people.

If this is the national culture, then we suspect this national culture is embedded in the spiritual DNA of all their geirim for the rest of history. We can't take that chance to ever let them marry into Klal Yisroel.

Another posuk tells us about the debt Klal Yisroel has to Egyptians and Edomim which obligates us to accept their third generation geirim into the Jewish community.

Let us first try to understand what kind of debt we have to Egyptians for letting us live in their land. Yosef came to Egypt and saved it from the brink of total disaster by a historic famine. Not only that, but he even enriched the royal treasury to unimaginable amounts of wealth and made it the most powerful nation in the ancient world. Yosef's family came down and Pharaoh opened the doors and pledged to support them unconditionally. The arrangement was made for Klal Yisroel to live in Goshen, and Pharaoh fulfilled his pledge.

But then Klal Yisroel began to vastly increase their numbers and many moved out of Goshen. Although they lived in Egypt for 210 years, they were brutally enslaved for the last 83 years of that period. This means for 117 years, the Egyptians totally supported Klal Yisroel. True, they had good reasons for doing so. They owed all their wealth to Yosef. But they faithfully kept their promise of support for generation after generation.

Eventually, the Egyptians had a radical change of heart and started viciously persecuting us. Forced back-breaking labor, mass murdering our baby boys – they essentially tried to destroy us. This creates a dilemma – if a person first does a tremendous chessed to you, and then perpetrates a horrible evil to you, does the bad behavior cancel out the good behavior? The Torah's answer is no. The good behavior always creates a debt of gratitude that is never cancelled. Such is the depth of the middoh of hakoras hatov we have to have – even towards people who tried to destroy us.

Middos tovos are the basis of living a Torah life.

It is very interesting when you look at the Rambam's Sefer HaMaddoh. After discussing the yesodei haTorah which obviously come first, the very next set of halachos are Hilchos De'os – the proper middos one has to have. Only then does he discuss Hilchos Talmud Torah. This shows how high middos are in the list of the Torah's priorities.

The Rambam in Peirush Hamishnayos says the same thing he says in Mishna Torah. The Mishna in Sanhedrin perek Chelek lists the people

who lose their olom habboch for the horribly severe aveiros they committed. The Rambam there adds that Chazal have another list of people with deficient middos who also lose their olom habboch. Even though the aveiros per se are not as severe, like publicly embarrassing your friend, the idea is that if you don't develop your middos to some significant degree, your neshomo is too underdeveloped and you just don't belong in olom habboch. He says the same thing in Hilchos teshuvah perek 9: Olom habboch is based on having middos tovos. They are fundamental to being a Jew.

These pesukim in the parsha are emphasizing that one of the most crucial middos that we need to cultivate, is the middoh of hakoras hatov. It must be deeply embedded and it must last for countless generations. If it isn't instilled deep enough in a nation's national culture, you can't gamble to allow their geirim to marry in to our community.

Now let us discuss what claim the descendants of Eisov have on us to allow their geirim to intermarry. The Torah says it is because Eisov is our brother.

But let's pause for a moment and take a closer look – what kind of relationship did Eisov have with Yaakov? Eisov hated Yaakov! He wanted to kill him! And throughout our history, Edom has always been an enemy. But the Torah still says treat him like a brother.

The Rambam explains that there is a Torah concept that requires us not to abandon our relatives and ignore them in times of need. In the Torah's view, having proper middos tovos requires us to act towards relatives in a close manner.

The first priority in tzedakah is to take care of the people closer to you in your family. Then it spreads out to one's city. It doesn't matter that he is a nasty horrible person as an individual. He's still a part of your family and you have a responsibility to take care of him. The Rambam in Moreh Nevuchim puts a very strong emphasis on this idea of looking after family members – coming from this mitzvah.

Through these mitzvos, the Torah identifies which middos are vital to cultivate into our national culture and to what extreme extent they obligate us.

But there is an exception to this mitzvah of having mercy on Edom – that exception is Amoleik. We are required to wipe out Amoleik's existence because they attacked us on our way out of Egypt – when we had nothing to do with them. It means their culture is irredeemably evil.

There is a very interesting idea being alluded to. Klal Yisroel represent a certain ideal of ruchniyus in the world. What is the story of Amoleik and Klal Yisroel? Klal Yisroel left Egypt in a spectacular fashion. We see from what Rochov Hazonah reported to the spies sent by Yehoshua, that the entire ancient world was shaken up and Eretz Canaan was in a total panic. Egypt was the most powerful nation in the ancient world at the time and Hashem completely devastated them. It is clear to everyone that Hashem is running the world.

Certain nations cannot tolerate Klal Yisroel's clear message to the world that Hashem runs everything that happens. They have to puncture that concept. Amoleik was a nation living far away – they came out of

nowhere. Why? Because they felt threatened by this concept.

Hashem tells Moshe after the battle with Amoleik that war must be waged against this nation in each generation until they are wiped off the face of the Earth. Rav Chaim asked, how can there be a war that is being fought against Amoleik in every generation, if today we don't even know who Amoleik is? He said that the posuk in Tehillim identifies Amoleik as those who try to eliminate the Jewish people as a nation and to erase them from historical memory.

Why would a nation be motivated to do this to Klal Yisroel? The Sifri on the posuk ויפוצו אויביו וינוסו משנאיך מפניך asks, how can Hashem have any enemies? The answer is that the people who hate Klal Yisroel only do so because they hate Hashem. A nation who is committed to evil cannot stand a nation who represents Hashem in the world.

Hitler ym"sh said this explicitly. He wrote in his book, Mein Kampf, that he can't tolerate the existence of Jews because they brought the concept of a conscience to the world. The German philosophy of humanity is that the strong must dominate the weak because at the core, we are also animals. The Jewish concept of a conscience doesn't allow us to fulfil our basic animal nature of domination. So we have to get rid of the Jews. As long as there is one Jew remaining in the world, the idea of a conscience will exist and stop us from expressing our animalistic nature.

The fact that there is absolute good and evil and Hashem rewards good and punishes evil is a very dangerous concept, and Klal Yisroel must be attacked. It is not only Amoleik, but every nation who adopts their evil culture and their agenda to remove Hashem's representatives from this world. This is why Amoleik must be destroyed completely.

Different nations have different cultures. And once a nation represents a certain culture, the Torah is uncompromising in how to deal with that nation.

We can elaborate at great length on the many ideas that are mentioned in Ki Seitzei. But every year I realize that the key message of the parsha is the importance of cultivating the middos tovos that the Torah demands of us. Especially the middoh of hakoras hatov and family loyalty and the extent that this middoh is expected to be kept.

I once had doubts in admitting a certain bochur who applied to Yeshivas Toras Moshe. But I knew that his great-great grandfather did a big favor for my grandfather a number of times. What does that have to do with me? I felt obligated by this favor to my family to give him a chance.

The nations of Ammon and Moav owe a debt of gratitude to us centuries after they received kindness from Avrohom Ovinu. And the debt extends to all of Avrohom's descendants in the future. Klal Yisroel owes a debt of gratitude to Egypt despite all the horrible things they did to us afterward. It doesn't matter. It is extreme and the Torah emphasizes it over and over. Without hakoras hatov to Hashem, we don't have the proper relationship with Hashem. We receive from Hashem everything that we have and we owe Him everything back.

It is one of the most important lessons of the entire parsha.