

There are many different ideas in this week's parsha, it is difficult to choose what to talk about. We will just discuss two of them for now.

One must build a fence around the roof of one's house to prevent people from falling off it. The posuk says, וְלֹא תִשָּׂאִים דְּקַיִם כְּבִיתְךָ כִּי יִפֹּל הַנֶּפֶל מִמֶּנּוּ

This is a strange phrase – “when the one who falls will fall.” Rashi explains that this person was condemned by Hashem to fall and die regardless of your actions, but you should still make sure you are not the cause of his death by leaving your roof unprotected. They are two independent things.

We saw this same idea from the posuk in Parshas Mishpotim, וְאָנֹכְךָ לֹא צָדָה וְהָאֱלֹקִים אֲנֵה לְיָדוֹ

Rashi there explains that two people committed murder – one accidentally and the other intentionally. But they escaped their punishment because there were no witnesses to allow the beis din to mete it out. So Hashem arranges that these two people find their way to the same place, and the accidental murderer climbs up a ladder and the malicious murderer is walking under it. In the presence of witnesses, the accidental murderer falls down and kill the malicious murderer, and as a result, each person receives their just punishment.

The idea that we are being taught here is that Hashem sees to it that those who need to die will die, but you are not absolved from blame if Hashem uses you to cause that person's death. You need to act properly and take the necessary precautions, so Hashem will find someone else through which to carry out His plans.

Yosef assures his brothers that he has no intention to take revenge on them for cruelly kidnapping him and selling him to slavery. Why? Yosef tells them: “I know that Hashem wanted me to come to Egypt one way or another. But Hashem decided to use your hatred of me as the vehicle to carry out His plans for me to come to Egypt. The fact that I was in Egypt as a slave and put into jail has nothing to do with you. It would have happened anyway, so I have nothing personally against you. The fact that Hashem used your bad middos to achieve His goals is between you and Hashem.”

This is a whole new perspective on how to look at everything that happens in the world. Hashem arranges everything that occurs in a very deep, detailed and precise manner. He arranges who gets killed and who remains alive. But you have to make sure you are not the vehicle by which people get their pre-determined punishment. The fact that Hashem arranges it does not absolve you of your responsibility for what happened. They are two independent things. You cannot say it was Hashem's will either way and avoid all the blame.

There is a critical Ramban in Parshas Vayeshev. The pesukim describe Yosef's search for his brothers – he kept getting lost, and Hashem sent a maloch to steer him in the right direction time and time again. The Ramban explains that Hashem has a plan to have Yosef meet his brothers and get sold to Egypt. This does not interfere with the bechiroh of his brothers. Hashem knows Yosef is absolutely devoted to kibbud av. He will do whatever his father commands despite knowing the danger when he meets his brothers. Hashem is sending all these malochim to keep Yosef on track, knowing Yosef won't give up no matter how dangerous it is. The Ramban's phrase is: והגזירה אמת שקר והחריצות שקר.

Hashem will make sure that what He wants will happen. But how each

person plays his role is up to his own individual bechiroh chofshis. You have to make sure your roof is safe. You don't lose responsibility even though Hashem has already condemned this person to die.

Another posuk in the parsha discusses the reason why we cannot allow geirim from Ammon and Moav to marry into Klal Yisroel. We aren't even supposed to extend the people of Ammon and Moav any courtesy and improve their welfare. Why? These two nations owed an unbelievable debt of hakoras hatov to Klal Yisroel because of what our ancestor Avrohom did for their ancestor Lot.

Lot was a very big opportunist. He was both a brother-in-law and a nephew to Avrohom because he married Soroh who was Lot's sister, and Lot and Soroh were both children of Horon who was Avrohom's brother. Horon couldn't decide if Avrohom was right or Nimrod was right. So when Nimrod forced Horon to make a choice, he preferred to first see what would happen to Avrohom Ovinu. He wasn't willing to make a gamble and stick his neck out for the emes.

Avrohom is miraculously saved from the kivshon ho'aish, so now Horon is willing to be thrown in – but no miracle is performed for him and he is burnt to death. Why? Hashem only did a miracle for Avrohom Ovinu because he was willing to give up his life for the emes. If you only are willing to play the odds and not stand up for what you believe, Hashem isn't going to save you.

Lot saw all this and decided to go along with Avrohom when Hashem told him to leave for Eretz Yisroel. He wants to follow Avrohom's success. When they come up from Egypt, they were both very wealthy men. How did Lot get his wealth? From Avrohom. But then they get into a fight between shepherds and agree to part ways. Lot – being the practical person he is – looks at the most fertile part of Eretz Yisroel and decides to follow the money. He knows that the people of S'dom are very wicked, but that is where the money is and he doesn't care.

Lot gets captured by the four kings and Avrohom goes out to battle them and saves his life. But Lot goes right back to S'dom. Hashem decides to destroy S'dom because of their wickedness, but agrees to save Lot and his family in the merit of Avrohom Ovinu. So everything Lot had in life was lost, because he followed opportunity instead of his conscience. There is a lot we can say about this subject.

The nations of Ammon and Moav owed their entire existence to Avrohom Ovinu.

There is a fundamental concept in the Torah called hakoras hatov. It is the foundation of the entire Torah. We naturally should feel a debt of gratitude to everyone from whom we have benefitted – to Hashem, to our parents, etc. The Chovos Halevovos says the underlying middoh which compels a person to accept the authority of Hashem and His Torah is the middoh of hakoras hatov. The people who should have felt this debt of gratitude towards Klal Yisroel the most were these two nations – the men should have extended aid to them in the desert. But instead, they hired Bilaam to curse them and then sent out their daughters to arouse Hashem's anger against them which almost destroyed them! So if they lack hakoras hatov, Hashem forbids us to allow them to marry into the Jewish community – forever!

But just imagine how far this goes. Hashem expected the debt of gratitude that Lot owed to Avrohom to be acutely felt 440 years later by his great-great grandchildren going back generations! As long as they self-identify as the descendants of Lot, they have to keep in mind

that their very existence is owed to Avrohom and therefore they need to show gratitude to Klal Yisroel. Just imagine – Eglon the king of Moav and the father of Rus could not have male children who could join Klal Yisroel when they convert.

Then the posuk tells us we must accept the Egyptian convert and the converts from Edom and allow them to marry into the Jewish community after three generations. Just as the Torah expects hakoras hatov from Ammon and Moav, the Torah expects Klal Yisroel to show hakoras hatov to Egyptian converts. But we have a very complicated history with Egypt. True, Egypt rolled out the red carpet and allowed Yaakov's family to move there when there was a famine in Eretz Canaan. But it was Yosef who made Egypt powerful and wealthy. Pharaoh promised Yosef that he would completely support Yosef's family, and he did so for 127 years. But for the last 83 years, they acted as vicious taskmasters with back-breaking slavery and unbelievable cruelty. So it is a mixed bag. We don't forget the evil, but Klal Yisroel is still expected to have hakoras hatov to Egypt for the good they did, and show it by eventually accepting them into the community after three generations. You are not allowed to turn them away.

Let's say that someone descends from Eisov and converts. His grandson cannot be denied a shidduch in our community because he is our brother. A Jew has to treat relatives with special kindness. Even though Eisov tried to destroy Yaakov. We often have rocky relationships with siblings growing up. But at a certain point, when they need us, we don't hesitate to help them out.

The Torah is teaching us the basic middos that a Jew has to develop in his personality – show hakoras hatov and extend a helping hand to a relative in need. We are not allowed to have anything to do with nations who lack these character traits. We have to protect ourselves from any possible influence and not allow them to marry our daughters. And this is 440 years after the debt was created by their ancestors!

And what about hakoras hatov to someone who did good things and bad things? The Torah teaches us that the bad doesn't cancel the good. We remember the bad but show hakoras hatov for the good.

They say the Vilna Gaon always honored his alef-beis rebbe, because he taught him only true things. This is what got him started in his life of learning, and he never forgot it.

Middos are not an incidental part of Torah. They are essential.

The Rambam says the essential key to olom haboh is limud Torah. Yet, the Rambam also says you need middos tovos as a pre-requisite. A person with bad middos will remain with a neshomo that is not on the level to be suitable for existing in olom haboh. These are lessons that we have to take very seriously.

A lot of areas need to be a part of our cheshbon hanefesh as we approach the yom hadin. Vidui booklets with lists and lists of aveiros often leave out the most essential points of the Torah – which are middos tovos. And in this week's parsha, the Torah expresses the absolute necessity for these middos in a very extreme way.