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Gratitude

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In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman ע"ה ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
who loved and supported Torah learning.

Vaeschanan

Gratitude

Good Shabbos!

Not too long ago, a top surgeon from the world-famous Cleveland Clinic was flown in to Israel to perform surgery on a famous rabbi.

The doctor was treated as if he were almost a visiting head of state. During his three-day visit to Israel, he met with the Prime Minister as well as with other important dignitaries.

Now this doctor, who wasn't Jewish, said that he didn't want to be paid for the surgery. He was happy to do it as a mitzvah. But the organizers asked another rabbi what they should do in this case. And the rabbi told them that they need to pay him—it's unbecoming that a non-Jewish doctor should think that Jews are beggars. Here they have a rabbi who's very, very important to them, and the doctor flown in especially from the United States to perform surgery on doesn't get paid for it?!

And so, out of simple recognition, they would have to pay him, the other rabbi ruled.

And indeed, they paid him his customary and standard fee of \$20,000.

In this week's Torah portion of Vaeschanan, we read about how Moshe warned the Jewish Nation against avodah zarah, or idol worship: "And you shall watch yourselves very well, for you did not see any image on the day that the L-rd spoke to you at Horeb from the midst of the fire" (Devarim 4:15).

And so from this verse we learn not to make any forms or sculptures, whether male or female, and so on. Likewise, in verse 19, the Torah portion tells us, "And lest you lift up your eyes to heaven, and see the sun, and the moon, and the stars... and be drawn away to prostrate yourselves before them and worship them"—be very careful about all these things.

And then, suddenly, Moshe switches to speaking about something personal. Verses 21 and 22 say, "And G-d was angry with me because of you, and He swore that I would not cross the Jordan... For I will die in this land."

And then Moshe goes back to the subject at hand. Verse 23 continues: "Beware, lest you forget the covenant of Hashem your G-d... and make for yourselves a graven image, the likeness of anything..."

An obvious question can be asked here: Why in the middle of his speech about avodah zarah does Moshe suddenly remember something personal? In the beginning of the Torah portion, Moshe already told the Jewish Nation that he had pleaded before G-d to enter the land and G-d told him, "Do not continue to speak to me more about this matter."

If so, why is Moshe mentioning it again?

To explain, let's step back and take a look at European Jewish history.

Everyone has heard of Prague. It's a city with a lot of Jewish history to it. Hundreds of thousands of tourists visit Prague each year, to see the old Jewish ghetto and all the other sights.

Now today, as we just said, Prague is a tourist mecca. But over three hundred years ago, it was one of the largest and most important Jewish communities in the whole Europe, and perhaps even in the entire world.

At that time in Europe, there was a very big rabbi by the name of Rabbi Yonason Eibeshutz. He was the rabbi of a small city.

So one day, a delegation shows up at his house with a rabbinical contract from the great city of Prague—the leaders of Prague's Jewish community were inviting Rabbi Yonason to come and sit in the seat of the rabbinate in their town.

Rabbi Yonason told them that he was very touched by the invitation, but that he would need several days to decide his future path.

This response was a bit strange to the delegation, because there should be no doubt that between being the rabbi of a small town and the rabbi of Prague, anyone would gladly accept the invitation to come to Prague. But still, they honored Rabbi Yonason's request.

In the meantime, the community heard that their rabbi had received an invitation to become the chief rabbi of Prague.

A few days went by, and Rabbi Yonason notified them that he indeed had accepted their offer, but that he would need several weeks to get organized before he left town.

Three weeks later, three wagons with drivers showed up to take the rabbi, his family, his stuff, his furniture and so on.

Rabbi Yonason began packing his books and his furniture, but the wagon drivers noticed that for some reason he wasn't rushing—he was doing everything slowly. And so, three full days went by.

Finally, the wagon drivers turned to the rabbi and said, "Honored rabbi: We need to move already!" And the rabbi answered: "Correct. You are right. We're going today. I just need to say goodbye to my community first."

He announced that he was going to give a farewell sermon in the synagogue, and the entire town gathered to say goodbye to the rabbi.

Rabbi Yonason Eibeshutz began his sermon. He started by saying that he was about to leave them—and so was asking them that even after he left, that they not stop coming to synagogue!

The crowd heard this request and was shocked.

The rabbi continued, asking them that after he left, that they not stop buying kosher meat. The people exchanged puzzled looks. And so the rabbi continued: Don't forget to light Shabbos candles, and son on.

Finally, one of the listeners suddenly burst out: "Honorable rabbi! I'm sorry for interrupting in the middle of the speech. But does the rabbi really think that if he leaves we will stop coming to synagogue?! The rabbi has known us for so many years. Does he suspect that we will stop buying kosher meat?!"

But this was the very question the rabbi had been waiting for.

Rabbi Eibeshutz then quoted the very same verses we just quoted, in which Moshe Rabbeinu remembers something personal in the middle of his sermon about idol worship: That he would not enter the Holy Land.

And Rabbi Eibeshutz asked the classic question: Why does Moshe Rabbeinu suddenly mix something personal into such an important subject?

"I'll explain to you what happened there," Rabbi Eibeshutz continued. "When G-d told Moshe at the Burning Bush to go to Egypt to take the Jewish Nation out of Egypt, Moshe was not in Egypt. He had not suffered under the Pharaoh. He was living in peace in Midyan. Additionally, Moshe was a wanted man in Egypt on charges of murder. He had killed an Egyptian man who had been beating a Jew, and the Pharaoh had put a death sentence on him. And so he fled."

"Now, Moshe could have said to G-d, 'How can I go to Egypt? The moment the Pharaoh sees me, he'll want to have me executed right away! It's suicide!' Still, Moshe went to Egypt. And then the entire dialogue between Moshe and the Pharaoh around the Ten Plagues took place, ending with Moshe taking them out of Egypt, splitting for them the sea (even though they complained), bringing down manna from heaven, and the quail, and water. What didn't he do for them?"

"In the story of the Sin of the Golden Calf," continued Rabbi Yonason, "It was Moshe who defended the Jewish Nation, saying, 'If not, please erase me from Your Book.' If G-d would not forgive them, then even Moshe would go with them. Then there was the saga of the Spies—and then, at the end of 40 years in the desert, G-d suddenly tells Moshe that he would not be entering the Holy Land!"

"Moshe had expected that when the Jewish Nation would hear this decree from G-d, there would immediately be a protest: 'How can this be?! Our master who loves us so much will not come with us into the Land of Israel?! It can't be!' He expected that they would organize protests and demonstrations, mass prayers, and so on. He expected the Jewish Nation to give G-d an ultimatum: If he does not

enter the Land, neither are we entering the Land. Either he comes with us, or we're staying with him."

"But what happened? Not one Jew got up. Nothing happened. It was completely quiet. The verses don't tell us about any protest organized by the Jewish Nation. It was business as usual."

"And so," Rabbi Eibeshutz continued, "Moshe told them, 'If you can so quickly forget what I did for you over 40 years, then it very well can be that you'll also forget what G-d did for you.' And so Moshe Rabbeinu reminded them that at Mt. Sinai, they 'didn't see any image,' and so they shouldn't go worship idols."

Concluding his speech, Rabbi Eibeshutz said to his community, "When they came to offer me the rabbinate of Prague, I told them I need a few days to decide. In the meantime, I made it known throughout town that I was offered to leave town. I was sure that there would be an outcry in town: 'How can it be that the rabbi is leaving us?!' I expected the heads of the community to come and plead, 'Please stay with us! We'll raise your salary, give you a few more days of vacation...'"

"Then three weeks went by, and it was still quiet. The wagons and wagon drivers arrived in front of my house three days ago and nothing happened. I was embarrassed by you! When the wagon drivers will come to Prague, people will ask them: 'Nu, how was it? I'll bet people crowded the streets and didn't let the wagons move so the rabbi wouldn't leave!' And what actually happened? Nothing!"

"If you can so quickly forget all the good things I did for you, all the years that I devoted myself to all the community members, all the troubled marriages, business disputes, and financial problems that I helped you with... if you forgot all of that so quickly, I'm afraid that you'll forget the good that G-d does for you. And so I reminded you that you need to go to shul, buy kosher meat, light Shabbos candles, and so on."

The point Rabbi Yonason was making was not to toot his own horn but to underscore a fundamental basic of all the mitzvos, the commandments—what Judaism calls hakaras hatov, or acknowledging the good.

In plain English, this means being grateful for everything that G-d gives us.

Whether it's the ethical mitzvos or the ritual mitzvos, if you take stock and remember how much your parents did for you and how hard it was for them to raise you, the next time they ask for something from you, you won't get angry but quite the contrary—you'll be happy to do it for them.

And how much more so is this true when it comes to G-d. A Jew gets up in the morning, says "Modeh Ani," "I acknowledge before You... that You have returned to me my soul," and expresses gratitude that G-d has given him or her a brand-new day with health, family, income, and all. And in all, what does He ask from us? To put on tefillin, to light Shabbos candles, to do as many mitzvos as we can.

If we were as truly grateful as we should be, no one would have to remind us to do the mitzvos—it would come from us on its own.

We always tell our kids to say “Thank you!” And saying “Thank you!” is easy and free. But what we really need to do is feel that “Thank you!” deep within. Because that is what gratitude is really all about.

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