

# Zera Shimshon

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## Chapter XV: Bo (Ex. 10:1–13:16)

### Essay 16. The wealth of nations

**שם** אמר רב פהנא: פשחלה רבי ישמעאל ברבי יוסי. שלח לו רבי: אמור לנו שנים ושלשה דברים שאמרת לנו משום אביד. שלח לו: פה אמר אבא, מאי דכתיב: "הללו אתה' פלגוים", אומות העולם מאי ע[ב]י[ב]י דתהו? אלא הכי קאמר: "הללו אתה' פלגוים" אגבורות ונפלאות דקא עביד להו, פל שפן אגן "כי גבר עלינו חסדו".

Also **there**, we read:

**Rav Kahana said: When Rabbi Yishmael, son of Rabbi Yosei, fell ill, Rabbi [Yehuda HaNasi] sent [a message] to him: Tell us two or three matters that you said to us, citing your father.**

**He sent [a message] to him: My father said as follows: What is [the meaning of that] which is written: "Praise the L-rd, all you nations, [praise Him all you peoples. For great is His kindness toward us . . .]"<sup>1</sup> What are the nations of the world doing [by praising G-d for being merciful to Israel]? [Rather], this is saying: "Praise the L-rd, all you nations" for the mighty acts and the wonders that He performed before them. All the more so we, [who benefited from these acts, should praise and thank Him], "for great it His kindness toward us."**

- Pesachim 118b

קשה אי לא הנה פל שפן לא היינו צריכים להודות, ומה עגנו וקשר זה לזה, ועוד מה הם גבורות ונפלאות דקא עביד להו. ואמרו ז"ל בפירק קמא דעבודת זרה על פסוק "ואנכי אפדם והמה דברו עלי פנבים", "נאני יפרתי" וכו', אמר הקב"ה אני אמרתי איסורם בייסורין בעולם הזה כדי שיתחזקו זרועותם לעולם הבא והמה ואלי יחשבו רע ע"כ. נמצא שאם הקב"ה יגבר חסדו ומדת טובו על ישראל בעולם הזה, אינו טוב להם, פי יותר נאה להם ליהנות מעט בעולם הזה כדי לזכות לרב טוב לעולם הבא.

Question 1: **A difficulty is that** the Gemara suggests that **if not for the** argument that **"all the more so, we . . . should praise and thank Him,"** that **we would not need to give thanks.**

Question 2: **Also, what is the connection and relationship between this** gratitude of the nations **and that** responsibility of ours to give thanks?

Question 3: **Also, what are the mighty deeds and wonders that He performs for them?**

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<sup>1</sup> Ps. 117:1–2.

[The rabbis], of blessed memory, said in the first chapter of tractate Avodah Zarah (4a), on the verse, “For I was their Redeemer; but they have spoken lies against Me”<sup>2</sup>:

“Though I have trained [יִסְרַתִּי] [yisarti] [and] strengthened their arms, yet they consider evil against Me,”<sup>3</sup> the Holy One, Blessed be He, says. I said that I would visit them [אִיֶּסְרֵם] [ayaserem] with afflictions [יִסְוִירִין] [yisurin] in this world so that their arms would be strengthened in the World-to-Come, but they consider [that which] I [have done] as evil.

- Avodah Zarah 4a

We find that if the Holy One, Blessed be He, were to increase His kindness and the measure of His goodness upon Israel in this world, it would not be good for them, because it is better for them to enjoy a little in this world in order to merit great goodness in the World-to-Come.

ואמרין נמי התם בסמוך אומר ר' אלכסנדר מלי דכתיב "והיה ביום ההוא אבקש להשמיד" וכו', אבקש ממי, אומר הקב"ה אבקש בניגני שקלם אם יש להם זכות, אפדים, ואם לאו, אשמידם. והפל מקשים מה צורך לבקשה זה, פשיטא שאין להם זכות, ומתראים במאי דאמרין ריש פרק קמא דעבודה זרה שסוברים האומות לומר הרבה שנוקים, הרבה פסוק ונהב הרבינו, והפל אינו אלא בשביל ישראל, והקב"ה מכחישם, פנראה התם "לי הפסוק ולי הנהב", וזהו "אבקש" וכו' הואיל שיש להם טענה זו.

It is also said there in the adjacent section:

Rabbi Alexandri says: What is [the meaning of that] which is written: “And it shall come to pass in that day, that I will seek to destroy all the nations”<sup>4</sup> “I will seek” from whom? The Holy One, Blessed be He, says: I will seek [and search] in their records; if they have merit, I will redeem them, and if not, I will destroy them.”

- Avodah Zarah 4a

Everyone asks what need there is for this request to search records, for it's obvious that they have no merit. They are answered by what is said at the beginning of the first chapter of Avodah Zarah, that the claim of the nations was to say:

We have established many marketplaces, we have built many bathhouses, [and] we have increased much silver and gold. And we did all [of this] only for [the sake of] Israel, so that they would [be free to] engage in Torah [study].”

The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to them: Fools of the world! Everything that you did, you did for your own needs. You established marketplaces to place prostitutes in them; [you built] bathhouses for your own enjoyment; [and as for the] silver and gold [that you claim to have increased], it is Mine, as it is stated: “Mine is the silver, and Mine the gold, said the Lord of Hosts.”<sup>5</sup>

- Avodah Zarah 2b

<sup>2</sup> Hosea 7:13.

<sup>3</sup> Hosea 7:15.

<sup>4</sup> Zech. 12:9.

<sup>5</sup> Haggai 2:8.

**The Holy One, Blessed be He, refuted them, as it appears there, “Mine is the silver, and Mine is the gold,” and that is the meaning of “I will seek to destroy all the nations,” since they have such a claim, that they sought to benefit Israel.**

ולדידן קשיא דאפילו הכי אין צורף לבקשה זו, דדבר פשוט הוא שכל מה שתיקנו לצורף עצמן תיקנו, וכן "לי הכסף ולי הזהב" וכו', ויש לומר דכוננת הקב"ה כן היא לומר, אבקש בניגני שלהם אם הנה להם זכות לזכות בכסף וזהב שנתתי להם, דומיא למאי דאמרינן "בשמאולה עשר וכבוד", דמי שלומד שלא לשמה ינהה לו עושר וכבוד, ואף מי שגורם לחבירו ללמוד. הכי נמי שאם נעשה לשמה ינהה לו אורף ימים ואם שלא לשמה עושר וכבוד.

**For us, this is difficult to understand, for even so, there is no need for this request, as it is a simple matter that whatever was established for their own needs, they established it. And likewise, “Mine is the silver, and Mine is the gold,” etc., one might say that the intention of the Holy One, Blessed be He, is to say, “I will seek in their records—if they had merit to deserve the silver and the gold I gave them.”**

**This is similar to what we say, “In her right hand is length of days, in her left hand, riches and honor,”<sup>6</sup> that one who doesn’t learn for the sake of Heaven will have riches and honor, and so too one who causes his friend to learn. It’s indeed so that if he will do so for the sake of Heaven, he will have length of days, and if not for the sake of Heaven, riches and honor.<sup>7</sup>**

והנה אמרו ו"ל" "הקל קול יעקב והידיים ידי עשו" כל זמן שקולו של יעקב מצפצף בכתו פנסיות ובכתו מדרשות אין הידיים ידי עשו שולטות, ולהפך מהפחד שישלטו ידי עשו בני יעקב אפטר שיעסקו בתורה. ואם ינהה זה, נמצא שהם גרמו שישאל יעסקו בתורה, ונסתר תירוץו של הקב"ה שאמר "לי הכסף ולי הזהב", שהרי בנה הכסף וזהב פטר וכו' בו הם למתן שכרם, וזה הכסף וזהב מועיל נמי לעסוק בתורה, כמו שכתב מהרש"א שכל מיני פרקמטיא מוליכים במקום שיודעים שיש שם הרבה מעות, והתלמיד תכם ההולך בשוק מוצא מקום להרויח כדי מזונותיו מהר ולחזור ללימודו, לפי שיש שם משא ומתן הרבה.

**Behold, [the rabbis] of blessed memory, said (in the opening of *Eicha Rabba*, section 2):**

**“The voice is the voice of Jacob, yet the hands are the hands of Esau”<sup>8</sup>—**

**As long as the voice of Jacob is heard in the synagogues and study halls, the hands of Esau do not rule. But conversely, due to the fear that the hands of Esau may rule, the children of Jacob are able to engage in Torah study.**

- Eichah Rabbah, Petichta 2 (see also Gen. Rabbah 65:20)

**If this happens, it turns out that they caused that Israel should engage in Torah study, and the reason given by the Holy One, Blessed be He, Who said, Mine is the silver, and Mine is the gold,” is refuted, for by this silver and gold they have already earned their reward. This silver and gold is also beneficial for engaging in Torah study, as the *Maharsha* wrote: People bring all types of merchandise to places where they know there is a lot of money, and**

<sup>6</sup> Prov. 3:16.

<sup>7</sup> Shabbat 63a.

<sup>8</sup> Gen. 27:22.

**the Torah scholar who walks in the marketplace finds a place to earn his livelihood quickly and return to his studies, because there is much business being conducted there.**

Thus, the answer to Question 3, what are the mighty deeds and wonders that G-d performs for the nations is their acquisition of wealth.

Question 2 asked about the relationship between the gratitude of the nations and our responsibility to show gratitude. Did the nations act for us or not? The Gemara's view in Avodah Zarah 2a is that the nations only acted for their own benefit, and that they are lying to say that they benefited us. Still, even if they inspired us to learn Torah out of fear of their power, shouldn't they still be credited for that? As noted above, if someone acts for the sake of Heaven, he is rewarded with a long life, but if he doesn't act for the sake of Heaven, he instead receives riches and honor. The nations definitely didn't act for the sake of Heaven, so even if they inspired us to learn Torah because of our fear of them, they at most will receive riches and honor.

וְנִהְיֶה אֲבִיקָשׁ בְּנִיגְנֵי שְׁלֵהֶם אִם לֹשׁ לְהֵם זְכוּת, אֶפְדֵם, וְאִם לֹא שְׂאֲדָרְבָּא בְּטָלוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל מִתְלֻמוּד תּוֹרָה וְעָשׂוּ "מִתְרַפֵּס בְּרִצְיֵי-קֶסֶף", שְׁלֵקְחוּ הַקֶּסֶף וְלֹא עָשׂוּ רְצוֹן הַבְּעָלִים כְּמוֹ שְׂאֲמָרוּ ו"ל, אִזְ אֲשַׁמְדִים. וְנִהְיֶה שְׂאֲמָר הַכְּתוּב "הִלְלוּ אֶת-ה' כָּל-גּוֹיִם" אֲגַבְרוֹת וְנִפְלְאוֹת דְקָא עֵבִיד לְהוּ, שְׁנִיתִן לְהֵם קֶסֶף וְנִהְבּ בְּלֵי שׁוּם זְכוּת, כָּל שְׁכֻן אֲנִן שְׂאֵף עַל פִּי שְׂאִין לְנוּ כֹּל כֶּף קֶסֶף וְנִהְבּ, הוּא מְשׁוּם ד' כִּי גִבֵר עָלֵינוּ חֲסִדוֹ", כְּדֵי שְׂיִתְחַזְקוּ זְרוּעוֹתֵינוּ לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא.

**This is the meaning of, “I will seek in their records; if they have merit, I will redeem them, and if not—if to the contrary, they have caused Israel to cease from Torah study, and Esau ‘prostrates before bars of silver,’<sup>9</sup> that he has taken silver but not done the will of the Owners, which is G-d, as [the rabbis] of blessed memory have said<sup>10</sup>—then, I will destroy them.**

That is, just as one may argue that the fear of the nations inspired Torah study, one can make the counterargument that the fear of the nations has hindered Torah study, and the nations should be destroyed for that!

**“This is the intent of what Scripture is saying, ‘Praise the L-rd, all you nations,’ for the mighty acts and the wonders that [G-d] performed for us.”<sup>11</sup> That he has given them silver and gold although they have no merit.**

**All the more so for us, and even though we don't have so much silver and gold, because “great is His kindness toward us,” so that our strength may be reinforced for the World-to-Come.**

That is, Question 1 on Pesachim 118b asked if it was saying that our responsibility to show gratitude only existed because of the nations' praise of G-d. No, it is instead making the point that even though we don't have their wealth, we will merit for learning Torah for the sake of Heaven, which will serve us in the World-to-Come.

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<sup>9</sup> Ps. 68:31.

<sup>10</sup> The term “the will of the Owners” is found, e.g., in Rabbeinu Yonah on Pirkei Avot 2:4, and Rashi on Sanhedrin 25b.

<sup>11</sup> Pesachim 118b.