

Parashat Noach 5777, 2016:

Understanding Kafui Tovah

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzhak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, David ben Elazar Yehoshua, the refuah shlaimah of Devorah bat Chana, Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka and Leah bat Shifra, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The post-Flood world should have been one wherein mankind felt chastened and humbled before the Almighty, having just survived near universal decimation. Moreover, logic would dictate that they should have demonstrated overwhelming *hakaret hatov* (manifest gratitude) to the Almighty for the mercy He had bestowed upon them. Instead, we are presented with the following disturbing narrative of the Tower of Babel:

Now the entire earth was of one language and uniform words. And it came to pass when they traveled from the east, that they found a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and fire them thoroughly;" so the bricks were to them for stones, and the clay was to them for mortar. And they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make ourselves a name, lest we be scattered [by G-d] upon the face of the entire earth." (*Sefer Bereishit* 11:1-4, this and all Tanach and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

At this juncture, "the L-rd descended to see the city and the tower that the sons of man had built." (11:5) The expression, "the sons of man had built," is rather peculiar for, in reality, who but men could have built the tower? This question is echoed in Rashi's (1040-1105) midrashically-inspired comment on our verse:

But the sons of whom else [could they have been]? The sons of donkeys and camels? Rather, [this refers to] the sons of the first man (*Adam Harishon*), who was ungrateful and said (*Sefer Bereishit* 3: 12): "The woman whom You gave [to be] with me [she gave me of the tree; so I ate]". These,

too, were ungrateful in rebelling against the One Who lavished goodness upon them, and saved them from the Flood.

In sum, Rashi views the actions of the *Dor Hahaphlagah* (Generation of the Tower of Babel) as parallel to the behavior demonstrated by *Adam Harishon* when asked by Hashem, “Have you eaten from the tree [of knowledge] of which I commanded you not to eat?” (3:11) Rather than taking personal responsibility for violating the one *mitzvah* entrusted to him, Adam denied culpability and blamed G-d for having given him Chava, and Chava for having given him the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge to eat. The Ba’al HaTurim (Rav Ya’akov ben Asher, 1270-1340) supports this perspective when he notes that Adam’s reaction personifies the *pasuk* (verse), “He who repays evil for good - evil will not depart from his house.” (*Sefer Mishle* 17:13) This is a particularly apropos observation, since the concluding Hebrew letters of the phrase, “*lo tamish ra’ah*” (“evil will not depart”) spell the word “*isha*” (“woman”) – a homiletic reference to the lack of gratitude to Hashem that Adam so blatantly demonstrated regarding Chava.

Both Adam, and the *Dor Hahaphlagah*, repaid Hashem’s beneficence with ingratitude. Years later, the *Dor Hamidbar* (the Generation of the Desert) unfortunately repeated this pattern of behavior time and time again. Tosafot in *Talmud Bavli, Avodah Zarah* 5a, discusses their actions in the following manner: “Therefore, [Moshe] labeled them [the Jewish people as practitioners of] *kafui tovah*, since they refused [to give thanks to Hashem for all of His beneficence] i.e. they refused to recognize the good that He had done for them in all of these matters.” The Torah Temimah (Rabbi Baruch Halevi Epstein, 1860-1942) expands upon Tosafot’s gloss and suggests that *kafui tovah* is far more than a failure to recognize the good that someone else has performed for you; instead, it is a completely conscious rejection of the kindness – as if it never had taken place.

The Abarbanel's (1437-1508) analysis of *kafui tovah* complements Tosafot's explication in a deeply psychologically insightful manner:

The most evil of all *middot* (behavioral traits) is *kafui tovah*. This is the case, since when a person recognizes [and gives voice] to the benefit he has received from another individual, he adds to the strength of the benefactor to [continue to] provide him with overflowing kindness - with a full sense of desire and in complete goodness. When, however, the recipient of manifest kindness consciously withholds the requisite recognition of the good that is his benefactor's due, he weakens his supporter's strength and aspiration to demonstrate further kindness to him. (*Commentary on the Torah, Sefer Shemot*, chapter 29, this and the following translations my own)

In order to buttress his exposition of our term, the Abarbanel cites Rav Ammi's words in *Talmud Bavli, Ta'anit* 8a: "Rain falls only for the sake of Men of Faith (*ba'alei emunah*) [i.e. trustworthy people]," as it is said, "Truth will sprout from the earth, and righteousness will look down from heaven." (*Sefer Tehillim* 85:12, Talmud translation, *The Soncino Talmud*) In the Abarbanel's estimation, *ba'alei emunah* are the people who practice *hakaret hatov*. He, therefore, reasons that those who engage in *kafui tovah* are the same people that our Sages identified as individuals steeped in brazenness and temerity (*azut panim*) – and the very ones who cause droughts. He maintains that this idea is intimated in the text, "And the rains were withheld, and there has been no latter rain...you refused to be ashamed." (*Sefer Yirmiyahu* 3:3) Thus, the Abarbanel opines:

Everything proceeds as our Sages said: "During the times that the Jewish people fulfill the will of the Omnipresent [i.e. we practice *hakaret hatov* and guard the Torah], we add to the power, so to speak, of that which is Above. As the text says, 'Now, please, let the strength of the Lord be increased, as You spoke...' (*Sefer Bamidbar* 14:17) [Conversely,] during the times that the Jewish people fail to fulfill the will of the Almighty [i.e. we are involved with *kafui tovah* and we do not keep the Torah], we diminish the power, so to speak, of that which is Above. As the text states, 'You forgot the [Mighty] Rock Who bore you; you forgot the G-d Who delivered you.'" (*Sefer Devarim* 32:18)

Based upon the presentations of Rashi, Tosafot, the Abarbanel and the Torah Temimah, it is clear that *kafui tovah* is a reprehensible behavioral trait that manifests itself in a knowledgeable

and brazen repudiation of the good which either G-d or man has done for us. As such, its remedy must be the polar opposite action, namely, *hakaret hatov*, wherein we demonstrate heartfelt gratitude to our benefactor through our words and deeds. With Hashem's help, may we master this *middah* so that we may fulfill King Solomon's stirring counsel: "Kindness and truth shall not leave you; bind them upon your neck, inscribe them upon the tablet of your heart; and find favor and good understanding in the sight of G-d and man." (*Sefer Mishle* 3:3-4) *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on "*Tefilah: Haskafah and Analysis*," may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.