

The Delicate Nature of Middos

פרשת נשא

The essential role of Tikkun Hamiddos in our Avodas Hashem is emphasized by our Sages in many places. Our Sages expound the Pasuk, “אמרות ה צרופה” that the Torah was only given to refine our characters. The Vilna Gaon echoes these words in his commentary on Mishlei, “If not for character refinement what is the purpose in living?” Being that Middos play such an important role in our Avodas Hashem, it is important that we gain a deeper understanding of their impact and what triggers them.

The Medrash Rabbah (12:16) in Parshas Naso says, “Why did the Nesiim bring the Korbanos with such zeal, yet by the Mishkan they were lazy, and they only donated the Shoham and Miluim stones at the end? This is because when Moshe announced to the Bnei Yisroel that all who have a generous heart should donate to the Mishkan, the Nesiim were insulted that they were equated to the rest of the Bnei Yisroel and were not specifically mentioned to donate. They therefore said let the nation bring, and we will donate whatever is missing.” The Medrash goes on to explain their disappointment and pain upon finding out that everything was donated, and that they had lost their opportunity to donate to the Mishkan. Therefore when it came to the Korbanos they were careful not to repeat their mistake and acted with zeal.

This Medrash offers a fascinating insight into the inner workings of Middos. The Medrash identifies the Middah that directly caused the Nesiim to bring their donation last for the Mishkan, as laziness. However, the Medrash clearly states that this Middah of laziness was triggered by the Nesiim feeling insulted, and if not for them feeling this way they would have brought first. Although they were on extraordinarily high levels and their shortcomings are on an infinitesimally small level, we can see from here how delicate Middos can be. The Nesiim were pained at their loss of opportunity to donate to the Mishkan, and responded with Zerizus for the Korbanos. Clearly they had a strong desire to donate to the Mishkan, and possessed the Middah of Zerizus. Yet, Middos are so delicate that a slight insult can trigger a Middah that is inactive and seemingly non-existent to come to the surface, resulting in an unwanted and undesirable outcome.

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We find an additional insight into how delicate Middos are in another Medrash in this week's Parsha. The Medrash explains why regarding Nachshon Ben Aminidav the Torah does not call him a Nasi as it does by the other Nesiim. Since Nachshon brought his Korban first, he may have felt elevated over the other Shevatim, and said, “I am a king over them.” Therefore the Torah did not call him a Nasi, so they can say to him, “The Torah identified you as a regular person.”

This Medrash is perplexing. Nachshon merited to bring the Korban first because he sanctified Hashem's name by jumping in the Yam Suf first. He was a tremendous Tzadik and a Baal Middos. Therefore any arrogance he felt was ever so slight. In addition, why would he feel that he can rule over the other Shevatim because he was first? Someone had to be first! It doesn't seem rational that this would cause him to feel that he is a king over the other Shevatim. Moreover, the response of the Shevatim seems difficult to understand. Granted, Nachshon is not called a Nasi, however in reality he was in fact a Nasi.

We learn from here that a small measure of arrogance has the power to impact a person to think irrationally. However, it seems from the Medrash that although this Middah is so impactful, through a simple reality check that, “I am not as great as I thought I was,” one can reframe and combat the Middah of arrogance.