

Parashat Noach, 5772, 2011:

Understanding Kafui Tovah (Rejecting the Good)

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and my sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

Kafui tovah is a recurring theme throughout Tanach (the Hebrew Canon of Scripture). It may be translated as rejection of a specific act of good or kindness that someone has done for you, i.e. ingratitude. Let us examine upon two of these instances.

The first example of *kafui tovah* occurs in *Sefer Bereishit* 3:13, immediately following Hashem's recognition of Adam's transgression against his one and only commandment, the prohibition of eating from the Tree of Knowledge: "And the man said, 'The woman whom You gave [to be] with me she gave me of the tree; so I ate.'" Chava had been given to Adam as an *ezer k'negdo* (helpmate). In recognition that she alone was his complement in this world he had declared: "This time, it is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. This one shall be called *ishah* (woman) because this one was taken from *ish* (man)." (*Sefer Bereishit* 2:23, this, and all translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) Given this awareness, Adam's proper response to Hashem's statement of his transgression should have been the recognition and rejection of his sin, and a statement that he would categorically refrain from this action in the future. In other words, he should have taken responsibility for his actions and pursued the steps of behavior transformation that we call *teshuvah* (repentance). He, however, failed to do so. Instead, he blamed Chava for "causing him to sin," and G-d for giving her to him. In doing so, he

engaged in *kafui tovah*, and radically missed the opportunity to spiritually grow and develop.

Our *parasha*, in *Sefer Bereishit* 11:1-9, contains a telling example of *kafui tovah*; namely, the story 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 upon the face of the entire earth." And the L-rd descended to see the city and the tower that the sons of the man had built. And the L-rd said, "Lo! [they are] one people, and they all have one language, and this is what they have commenced to do. Now, will it not be withheld from them, all that they have planned to do? Come, let us descend and confuse their language, so that one will not understand the language of his companion." And the L-rd scattered them from there upon the face of the entire earth, and they ceased building the city. Therefore, He named it Babel, for there the L-rd confused the language of the entire earth, and from there the L-rd scattered them upon the face of the entire earth.

Rashi (1040-1105), basing himself upon *Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 38:9, noted the very odd use of the *heh hayediah* (the letter "heh" as the definite article) in verse 11:4 ("*asher banu b'nai ha'adam*," "that the sons of **the** man had built") and made the following observation:

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**, who was ungrateful and said (above 3: 12): "The woman whom You gave [to be] with me." These, too, were ungrateful in rebelling against the One Who lavished goodness upon them, and saved them from the Flood.

Thus, according to Rashi, the builders of the *Migdal Bavel* (Tower of Babel) are the consummate example of *b'nai kafui tovah*. Instead of being grateful and showing their appreciation to Hashem for sparing them from the death and destruction of the *mabul* (the Flood), they acted with disdain and superciliousness toward Him. *Kafui tovah* takes firm root and flourishes in an environment and societal structure wherein man believes he,

rather than G-d, is the measure of all things. This was precisely the culture and psychological orientation of the *dor hahaflagah* (Builders of the Tower of Babel). Man attempted to replace G-d, and thereby denied the power and grandeur of his Creator: "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make ourselves a name ..." Quite simply, they wished to rebel against G-d - **the Name** (*Hashem*) - dethrone Him, and establish themselves as the masters of the universe. Unfortunately, this tale of unmitigated hubris has been told and retold throughout history: Man arrogantly rejects G-d, "makes himself a name," repudiates the ethics and morality of the Torah, and, ultimately self-destructs.

The great Lithuanian Rosh Hayeshiva, Rav Natan Tzvi Finkel *zatzal* (1849-1927, "the Alter of Slobodka"), was the founder and leader of the famous Yeshiva of Slobodka. In addition, he was one of the giants of the modern Musar movement. He built upon Rashi's above-stated comment, and noted that the entire orientation and inherent corruption of the *dor hamabul*:

...that motivated them to rebel against Hashem, and build the Tower of Babel, was solely because they were "the children of the man," the children of the selfsame original Adam who had engaged in *kafui tovah*. Now, we have the perspective to see how far-ranging [are the effects] of improving our ethical behaviors (*hamidot hamusariot*) or [G-d forbid,] their diminishment. They last for generations to come, for both good and bad. (From Rabbi Aharon Yaakov Greenberg's work *Itturei Torah*, translation my own)

I believe that Rav Finkel's words carry a highly practical message for our own time. By definition, we are the children of the "selfsame original Adam who had engaged in *kafui tovah*." Ingratitude, therefore, is an all too easy *middah* (behavior trait) for us to embrace. Let us be honest and ask ourselves some difficult questions: Do we express our appreciation to our spouses for their many acts of care and concern, or do we sometimes

take these, and them, for granted? Do we remember to thank our children when they act in a thoughtful and respectful manner, or do we simply consider these positive behaviors our due? Do we recognize, rather than merely expect, the kindness and efforts of our friends and fellow workers? Our individual responses to these questions will be different. Yet, upon honest reflection, one thing is quite clear – we all have room to grow in our relationships with the significant people in our lives. No one of us is perfect in the area of *bein adam l'chaveiro* (between man and his fellow man).

With G-d's help, may this be the year wherein each and every one of us grows in *hakaret hatov* (recognition of the good) and rejects, once and for all, the *middah* of *kafui tovah*.
V'chane yihi ratzon.

Shabbat Shalom

Past drashot may be found at my website:

<http://reparashathashavuah.weebly.com/>

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added please do not hesitate to contact me via email at rdb718@gmail.com.