

## DARCHAI NOAM

### Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם

(Mishlei 3:17)

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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

### Shmot – Be proud to be Jewish

This week's Parsha of Shmot features Moshe Rabbeinu for the first time. Moshe never enters the land of Israel, even after he begs Hashem 515 times for the privilege. Moshe is not even permitted to be buried in Israel. In contrast, Yosef died in Mitzrayim but his bones were carried into the land of Israel for burial. Moshe himself attends to Yosef's bones. Why is Yosef granted the privilege of being buried in Israel while Moshe is not?

The Midrash<sup>1</sup> explains this based on an incident that occurred in this week's Parsha. After escaping from Mitzrayim, Moshe arrives in Midian and sits by a well. Yitro's seven daughters arrive at the well to water their sheep. The other shepherds harass them and prevent them from accessing the well. Moshe comes to their rescue. The seven daughters return to their father and report on what happened:

*"They said: "An Ish Mitzri (Egyptian man) saved us from the shepherds and also drew water for us and watered the sheep". (Shmot 2:19)*

Moshe is incorrectly called an Ish Mitzri. However he doesn't complain or correct this misconception. Moshe had been wearing Egyptian clothes<sup>2</sup> so it was an understandable mistake for Yitro's daughters to make. Nevertheless, the Midrash criticises Moshe for presenting himself as an Egyptian.

In contrast, we see that Yosef did not hide his origin as a Hebrew. For example, when the butler recommends Yosef to Pharaoh as an interpreter of dreams he refers to him as a Hebrew (Breishit 41:12). Remarkably, even after Yosef is second in charge to the king he still has to eat alone because the Egyptians would not eat with a Hebrew (Breishit 43:32). The Midrash states that this is the reason Yosef was rewarded with burial in the land of Israel while Moshe was denied this privilege.

It seems a bit harsh for Moshe to be punished for this incident with Yitro's daughters. After all, he wasn't present when Yitro's daughters referred to him as an Egyptian to their father so he wasn't able to protest. It could be that Moshe was punished for allowing himself to appear as an Egyptian. Alternatively, it has been suggested that Moshe should have protested at a later point in time – when Hashem was dictating the Torah to Moshe. When Hashem reached the point in the narrative that described this incident Moshe should have protested at being referred to as an Ish Mitzri. However Moshe did not speak up, and perhaps this is why he was punished.<sup>3</sup>

Feeling distress at not being acknowledged as Jewish demonstrates pride in the very fact that one is Jewish. One lesson for us to learn is to take pride in the fact that we belong to the Jewish people. Practically speaking, this can be challenging, especially for those of us that live in a secular society and interact with non-Jews on a daily basis. There is often pressure to blend in with our surroundings and to downplay our special status.

<sup>1</sup> Devarim Rabbah 2:8.

<sup>2</sup> Midrash Shemot Rabbah 1:32.

<sup>3</sup> Heard from Rabbi David Blackman.

Throughout the ages, being known as the Chosen People has spawned jealousy and strife. Non-Jews question why only the Jewish people are honoured to have been 'chosen'. However this is a common misunderstanding. Being 'chosen' means that we are chosen for responsibility. We have a unique role to play in being a light unto the nations and teaching the world about ethical monotheism. Of course it is an enormous privilege to be Hashem's chosen people in the world. But the focus should be on our responsibilities rather than our privileges. The Chovot Halevavot<sup>4</sup> explains that people who Hashem singles out with special favour or privilege are under an obligation of additional service. For example, if someone is blessed with wealth they should use their wealth to give tzedaka and help others. If someone is blessed with intelligence they should use that intelligence to learn and teach Torah.

This non-Jewish approach to the Chosen People is captured in the following lines of witty verse:

*"How odd of G-d / To choose the Jews".<sup>5</sup>*

A number of replies were written to this verse. One of them was as follows:

*"Not so odd / The Jews chose G-d."<sup>6</sup>*

Hashem chose us, the Jewish people, **because** we chose him. Avraham decided unilaterally to spread the knowledge of Hashem to the world. As Avraham's descendants we continue this role. We should be proud of this.

This brings to mind a well-known joke:

*Robert was a "one-day-a-year-Jew". He would only attend shule on Yom Kippur. One year, as he was leaving after the Yom Kippur services, the Rabbi bade him farewell and then asked him when he would finally join the army of G-d. Robert looked around to make sure that no-one was listening and then whispered in the Rabbi's ear: "I've already joined the army of G-d but I'm working undercover".*

Let's not waste our special privileges and responsibilities by hiding 'undercover' and trying to blend in. We each have a special Jewish neshama that needs and yearns to shine its light to the world. Let it shine!

Let's try something this week:

1. Remember that we are privileged to belong to the Jewish people. It is our choice whether to be proud of this fact, or ashamed of it.
2. There may be pressure to blend into our secular surroundings. However identifying too closely with the non-Jewish people around us risks losing our unique identity and prevents us from fulfilling our special role in the world.
3. Our fellow Jews are special merely because they too have been chosen to belong to this special people. For this reason alone they deserve our respect.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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<sup>4</sup> The Gate of Serving G-d, Chapter 6

<sup>5</sup> Attributed to William Norman Ewer (1885-1976), a British journalist who spied for the Soviet Union in the 1920s.

<sup>6</sup> Another reply (attributed to Leo Rosten) which is not relevant to this shiur but is quite humorous is as follows: "Not odd of G-d / Goyim annoy 'im".