

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Shmot
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darchai.noam@gmail.com
www.darchai-noam.com

How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Shmot – Be proud to be Jewish

This week's Parsha of Shmot introduces us to Moshe Rabbeinu, who is mentioned for the first time in the Torah. Moshe never enters the land of Israel, even after he begs Hashem 515 times for the privilege¹. Moshe is not even 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 Midrash² answers this question 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 the sisters and prevent them from accessing the well. Moshe comes to their rescue. The seven daughters return to their father and report 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)

They mistakenly refer to Moshe as an ‘Ish Mitzri’. However, Moshe doesn't complain or correct this misconception. Moshe had been wearing Egyptian clothes³ so it was an understandable mistake for Yitro's daughters to make. Thus, the Midrash criticises Moshe for presenting himself as an Egyptian, and causing others to misconstrue his identity.

In contrast, Yosef did not hide his origin as a Hebrew. We can glean this from the fact that, when the butler recommends Yosef to Pharaoh as an interpreter of dreams, the butler refers to Yosef as a Hebrew⁴. Remarkably, even after Yosef is second in charge to the king he still eats alone because the Egyptians will not eat with a Hebrew.⁵ According to the Midrash, because Yosef presented himself as a Hebrew, and did not hide his status as a Jew, he was rewarded with burial in the land of Israel. And in contrast, this is why Moshe was denied this privilege.

It may appear that Moshe's punishment for this incident with Yitro's daughters is quite harsh. After all, Moshe was not even present when Yitro's daughters referred to him as an Egyptian to their father, so he wasn't able to protest. Perhaps Moshe was punished for allowing himself to appear like 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, perhaps Moshe should have protested at being referred to as an Ish Mitzri (he at least should have protested in his heart, or felt some remorse). However, Moshe did not speak up or feel sufficient indignation or repulsion at this misconception, and perhaps this is why he was punished.⁶

Feeling distress at not being acknowledged as Jewish demonstrates pride in the very fact that one is Jewish. One lesson we can learn from this 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

¹ Devarim Rabbah 11:6, based on the gematria of the word “Vaetchanan” in Devarim 3:23.

² Devarim Rabbah 2:8.

³ Midrash Shemot Rabbah 1:32.

⁴ Parashat Miketz, Breishit 41:12.

⁵ Parashat Miketz, Breishit 43:32.

⁶ Heard from Rabbi David Blackman.

status. Some of us may actually find ourselves consciously or subconsciously taking pride when we successfully manage to blend in and not be identified as Jewish!

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".

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 Chovot Halevavot⁷ explains that people who Hashem singles out with special favour or privilege have an obligation to undertake additional service. For example, if someone is blessed with wealth, they should use their wealth to give tzedakah 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".⁸

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

"Not so odd / The Jews chose G-d."⁹

Hashem chose us, the Jewish people, **because** we chose him. The Midrash¹⁰ teaches that Hashem offered the Torah to the other nations however they rejected it. Only the Jewish people accepted it immediately and unconditionally. 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 special responsibility.

Let's not waste our special privileges and responsibilities by hiding 'undercover' and trying to blend in. At best, these efforts to blend in show how little we value our true, unique and precious role as Hashem's chosen people. At worst, these efforts show how much we value the secular, non-Jewish view and values. We each have a special Jewish neshama that needs and yearns to light up the world. Let it shine!

Let's try something this week:

1. Remember that we are privileged to belong to the Jewish people. We can choose to be proud of this fact, or ashamed of it.
2. There may be pressure to blend into our secular surroundings. However, if we identify too closely with the non-Jewish people around us we risk losing our unique identity and this can prevent 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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⁷ "Duties of the Heart", The Gate of Serving G-d, Chapter 6

⁸ Attributed to William Norman Ewer (1885-1976), a British journalist who spied for the Soviet Union in the 1920s.

⁹ 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".

¹⁰ Midrash Sifri, Deuteronomy 343.