

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Bo
January 2018 / Shvat 5778

darchai.noam@gmail.com
www.divreitorah.net/darchai-noam

How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Bo – fancy dress

In this week's Parsha of Bo we read about the last three plagues and the final preparations before the long-awaited exodus. As part of these preparations, Bnei Yisrael requested silver and gold vessels from their Egyptian neighbours. This was a form of compensation for the years of slave labour that they had provided to the Egyptians. It is analogous to the mitzva to give gifts to a slave when the slave is freed.¹ Hashem specifically asked Moshe to tell Bnei Yisrael to request these gifts:

*“Hashem said to Moshe...Please, speak into the ears of the people, and let each [Jewish] man request from his [Egyptian] fellow and let each [Jewish] woman from her [Egyptian] fellow, **silver vessels and gold vessels.**” (Parshat Bo, Shmot 11:2).*

Bnei Yisrael carried out Moshe's instruction to them:

*“And Bnei Yisrael did according to the word of Moshe, they requested from the Egyptians **silver vessels, gold vessels and garments.**” (Parshat Bo, Shmot 12:35)*

Interestingly, Bnei Yisrael also requested garments. Why? The instruction to Moshe only referred to silver and gold vessels. To answer this question, we need to look back at Parshat Shmot, and specifically when Hashem first spoke to Moshe at the burning bush:

“And I will grant [Bnei Yisrael] favour in the eyes of the Egyptians and it will be that when they leave they will not go empty-handed. Each woman shall request from her neighbour and the [Egyptian] who dwells in her house silver vessels and gold vessels and garments and you shall put them on your sons and daughters and you shall empty out Egypt.” (Parshat Shmot, Shmot 3:21-22).

There was a specific command for the Jewish women to dress their children in Egyptian clothing before they left the country! This seems very surprising. There is a well-known Midrash which lists the positive deeds which Bnei Yisrael did which merited in them being rescued from Mitzrayim. One of the meritorious acts listed was that they did not assimilate with the Egyptians by retaining their distinctive style of dress.² After resisting the temptation to emulate the Egyptians for over two hundred years, why would Hashem specifically command Bnei Yisrael to wear Egyptian clothing just as they were about to leave?

Whatever Hashem says, goes.

Atheists subscribe to the view that it is possible to be good without G-d. They understand that human beings can work out what is the ethical thing to do in each situation. However, the Jewish view is that in

¹ Devarim 15:13-14.

² Many people quote the “well-known” Midrash that Bnei Yisrael merited the exodus because they kept three things intact – their names, their clothing and their language. There is actually no such Midrash! It is actually two Midrashim blended together. There are a number of such lists provided in various Midrashim. For example, the Midrash in Vayikra Rabba (32) lists four things: names, language, avoiding lashon hara and avoiding promiscuity. Another Midrash (Lekach Tov Devarim 26:5) lists: names, food and clothing. The Chatam Sofer in his ethical will mentioned the importance of preserving our names, clothing and language but he did not claim to be quoting a Midrash. In any case, all of the lists suggest that Bnei Yisrael earned merit because they did not assimilate into the Egyptian culture.

order to act correctly in each situation we must follow what Hashem says.³ Humans are finite and subjective and we cannot understand the entire picture. We need an objective source to tell us what is right. The only objective source is Hashem and His Torah. If we are commanded by Hashem to do something, then it must be the correct and true thing to do.

This can lead to situations which our mortal intellect perceives as contradictory. For instance, the Ramban⁴ teaches us that Hashem's commandments are outside the constraints of nature. If someone were to eat the permitted fats of an animal they would be totally fine from a spiritual perspective.⁵ However, if they were to intentionally eat chailev (forbidden fat) from the same animal, this would constitute a serious sin and they would sustain spiritual damage. Why the difference? The Ramban explains that the answer to this seeming contradiction constitutes a hidden miracle that is above our understanding.

For example, Hashem told us very clearly at Har Sinai that it is forbidden to fashion a carved image. That is why the Golden Calf was such a terrible sin. However, Hashem also commanded us to fashion the cherubim (human forms with wings and the faces of babies made from gold) on top of the Holy Ark! How can we understand this apparent contradiction? The answer is that we don't have to understand it! What Hashem says to do, we do. We trust in Hashem and not our own sense of rational logic. Things don't have to make sense in order to be right.

While Bnei Yisrael were in the midst of the exile in Mitzrayim, avoiding assimilation was crucial. They needed to hold on tight to their traditions – their style of dress, their language, their names and their food kept them separate and functioned to prevent assimilation. If they would have let go and blended in, there was a real risk that they would become Egyptian and cease to exist as an independent entity. Now that Bnei Yisrael were about to leave, Hashem in His wisdom decreed that it was an appropriate time to wear Egyptian clothing. So that is what Bnei Yisrael did.

Dress your children!

As an interesting aside, some commentators have noted the fact that it was specifically the **children** that were to be dressed in the Egyptians clothing. However, there is no indication that the clothes that were taken from the Egyptians were children's clothing. Perhaps this suggests that the Egyptian adults were wearing clothes that were more appropriate in size and style for children than for adults!

Adhering to the laws of dressing modestly provides many benefits. For example, it helps to ensure that individuals are treated as people, rather than as objects. It is an unspoken message that we are a holy people, separate from Western culture. Privacy and holiness go hand in hand – keeping something separate and concealed enhances its holiness. Some of the laws of modesty are obligatory (e.g. covering elbows, knees and collarbones) and some are based on the customs of certain communities. One can often tell whether an item of clothing is appropriate or not. If one is unsure they should ask their Rabbi.

Let's try something this week:

1. There is a time to stand firm and do everything possible to avoid assimilation.
2. When faced with a mitzva that doesn't make sense on a rational level, remember that in His wisdom, Hashem knows best.
3. Try to keep in mind the laws of modest dressing and remember that our clothing helps to keep us separate and holy. This is particularly relevant for our readers in the Southern hemisphere who are currently in the middle of summer!

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

³ There is a fascinating theological debate as to whether there is an objective 'good' to which Hashem Himself is bound, or if things are only 'good' or 'bad' simply because Hashem said so. Now is not the time to enter into this debate. It is sufficient for our purposes to note that our understanding is limited. It is true that many times it is obvious what is good and what is bad. But the only way to know for certain in every situation is to turn to Hashem and His Torah.

⁴ In his commentary to Breishit 46:15.

⁵ Of course their cholesterol may not be fine, but that is another matter.

*** **

About Darchai Noam

Darchai Noam is available online at www.divreitorah.net/darchai-noam. You can access this week's edition of Darchai Noam, archived back issues of Darchai Noam and other divrei Torah.

The pasuk in Mishlei (3:17) describes the Torah as follows: "Its ways are ways of pleasantness (Darchai Noam) and all its paths are peace". The Torah is our guidebook for life. It is packed full of good advice as to how we should live our lives.

The aim of the Darchai Noam weekly email is to examine an idea from the weekly parashah relating to good middot (character traits). It will focus particularly on treating each other with respect and how to interact with each other in a more peaceful and pleasant manner. It will also suggest some practical tips for implementing these ideas in our daily lives.

By learning together each week, and making an effort to regularly put the ideas into practice, with Hashem's help we can all gradually improve our character traits and our observance of 'v'ahavta l're'echa kamocho' – loving one's fellow as oneself.

If you know someone who might enjoy receiving this email please feel free to pass it on to them or email me their details so I can add them to the subscription list.

You are welcome to use the content of this email in any way that will help to spread the learning of Torah. However please attribute credit appropriately.

Many of the ideas that I use in Darchai Noam are based on ideas that I read or heard from various sources. Where possible I try to quote the source. However in some cases I cannot recall the source. For that I apologise. If I do discuss an idea that I heard from somewhere else, any errors are purely my own.

Darchai Noam is available online at www.divreitorah.net/darchai-noam. You can access this week's edition of Darchai Noam, archived back issues of Darchai Noam and other divrei Torah.

How to subscribe or unsubscribe

If you would like to subscribe or unsubscribe to Darchai Noam, please send an email to darchai.noam@gmail.com with the word 'subscribe' or 'unsubscribe' in the subject.