

## DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

### “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Bo  
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

### Bo – Doing our little bit

This week's Parsha of Bo contains the last three plagues, including the death of the firstborn, which finally brought Pharaoh and the Egyptians to their knees. We have the farcical image of Pharaoh running through the streets of Mitzrayim in the middle of the night in his pyjamas<sup>1</sup>, desperately trying to find Moshe and Aharon in order to send Bnei Yisrael out of the country as quickly as possible. But Bnei Yisrael were not in a hurry to leave. They would leave in accordance with Hashem's timetable, the following morning. That night, Bnei Yisrael were safely ensconced in their homes, enjoying the first Pesach seder in history. They were protected from the ravages of the plague of the first born that was taking place throughout the land, by the blood of the Pesach korban that they had placed on their doorframes.

About four years ago, I was spending the day running errands and taking care of mundane needs. On the way home I was waiting at the bus stop and trying to work through the Parsha<sup>2</sup>. All of a sudden, a man sat down next to me and started to talk to me. At first, I felt slightly agitated because he was interrupting my learning. But I did my best to be polite. He asked me about what I was learning and he then proceeded to explain various novel ideas in the Torah portion that I had never heard before. It was clear that this was no ordinary person. He continued to pose inciteful questions about the Parsha and then provide the answers until the bus came. I was sorry that we would have to part, but then I was delighted that he got on the next bus with me! Of course, I sat next to him and he continued to give me Torah thoughts and words of wisdom for the entire journey. One of his insights which has stayed with me concerned why Bnei Yisrael had to put blood on their doorposts in Mitzrayim. Hashem wanted Bnei Yisrael to do their hishtadlut (personal effort) in order to earn their redemption. Yet, clearly Hashem was doing all the work. The small act of placing the blood was totally insignificant in the scheme of things. However, we needed to put the blood there because Hashem wanted us to play a very small role and then leave the rest to Him. The man then looked at me and said "The same message applies to earning our parnasah. You need to put in a small effort and leave the rest to Hashem. Work out how much you need and how much effort you should put in, and then don't do any more than that".

In an objective sense, the act of applying the blood to the doorposts was totally insignificant. Surely Hashem knew which families were Jewish and didn't need the sign of the blood on the doorposts to highlight this. There was no obvious use for the blood in assisting Hashem to carry out the miraculous exodus that was about to occur. Only Hashem could execute the devastating

<sup>1</sup> See Shmot 12:30-31 with Rashi. There is a popular children's song in Israel about "Pharaoh in his pyjamas in the middle of the night".

<sup>2</sup> It is a mitzva to read the entire Parsha every week – twice in Hebrew and once in Aramaic (Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 285:1 (שנים מקרא ואחד תרגום)). If one struggles with the Aramaic, they can replace it with Rashi or with any English commentary that they can understand. Better still, one should read the Aramaic translation as well as the commentary.

10<sup>th</sup> plague and then bring the entire Nation of Israel out of Mitzrayim. However, Hashem still told Bnei Yisrael that they needed to play a role. This little act of placing the blood on the doorposts was the fulfilment of a commandment of Hashem and gave Bnei Yisrael some of the merit that they needed to be protected and ultimately saved.

This teaches us a lesson for all aspects of our lives. We need to do our hishtadlut, but at the same time we need to recognise that Hashem is really operating behind the scenes and making sure that things happen in the way that they should. Hashem wants us to play our role, indeed he will only give us bracha if we participate. And yet our challenge is to see behind the wall of nature and realise that the outcome and effect of our actions are purely from Hashem.

The Chovot Halevavot offers a clever analogy to explain this idea. Imagine a person who is hungry. He is sitting at the table in front of a juicy steak, cooked to perfection. The man thinks to himself: Hashem created this steak in order for me to enjoy it and obtain the nutrition and energy that I need. If Hashem really wants me to benefit from this steak, he will work out a way for that to happen. I don't need to exert any effort at all. I can just sit back and wait for Hashem to act. He then sits at the table and just looks at the steak. Of course, nothing happens. He needs to exert the minimal effort required to cut the steak into bite sized pieces, place it into his mouth and chew the food! Similarly, in all of our endeavour we need to invest the minimal effort before any outcome can occur.

However, let us have a closer look at Bnei Yisrael's act of placing the blood on their doorposts. The physical act involved in applying the blood was minimal. However, behind that physical act lay a vast and courageous spiritual act. The blood taken was that of a young goat or lamb, which was the Egyptian deity. For three days each family kept the goat or lamb tied up in preparation. When the Egyptians asked what they were doing, Bnei Yisrael told them that were going to slaughter the animal as a korban, as commanded by Hashem. They required enormous faith to sacrifice the deity of the Egyptian masters in front of their faces without fear of retribution or death. The blood on their doorposts represented this phenomenal act of faith.

The act of placing the blood on the doorposts was a small, almost insignificant act in terms of physical effort but it was an enormous display of emunah. We could say that it was a small step for hishtadlut but a giant leap for emunah!

This is a good parallel to all our endeavours in the world. Though we can think of it in terms of earning parnasah, it also applies to many other areas as well. We **do** need to make the effort and put in our hishtadlut. But we have to always remember that our input is only a token contribution at best. Hashem is in charge of all outcomes. Once we have put in sufficient hishtadlut<sup>3</sup>, we need to step back and leave the outcome to Hashem. Sometimes this can be most difficult of all – having the emunah to understand and believe that Hashem is really governing all outcomes and there is nothing more that we can do, and to accept this truth with calmness and equanimity.

Let's try something this week:

1. Remember the message of the blood on the doorposts – this teaches us that we need personal effort to trigger an outcome, and yet our effort is not the real cause of our success.
2. Remember too, the enormous emunah displayed by Bnei Yisrael in slaughtering the Egyptian deity in public. When we have faith and we are doing what Hashem wants us to do, we have no need to fear.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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<sup>3</sup> Knowing how much hishtadlut is appropriate is a complex subject for a different time.