

DARCHAI NOAM**Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם**

(Mishlei 3:17)

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

B'shalach – The importance of shalom

In this week's Parasha of B'shalach, Bnei Yisrael finally leave Mitzrayim. But before they can escape Pharaoh's clutches once and for all, they face a final confrontation at the Yam Suf (the Reed Sea). Hashem is about to perform perhaps the most famous open miracle - the splitting of the sea.

Camping by the sea on the sixth day after the exodus, Bnei Yisrael saw Pharaoh and his army approaching in the distance. They were trapped between the Egyptians and the sea. A great argument broke out amongst Bnei Yisrael as to the best method of dealing with this crisis. Bnei Yisrael split into groups. The tribes of Zevulun, Naftali and Benyamin wanted to surrender to the Egyptians. Yehuda, Dan, Ephraim and Menashe wanted to fight. Levi, Gad and Asher wanted to make noisy diversions to frighten the Egyptians. Reuven, Shimon and Issachar wanted to jump into the sea.¹

We all know what ultimately transpires - Bnei Yisrael walk through to safety on dry land and the Egyptian army are washed away. But the Midrash (Yalkut Shimoni 1:234) reveals that the outcome was not so clear cut. On the night before the sea split (see Sh'mot 14:19-20) the pillar of cloud that had been travelling in front of Bnei Yisrael moved behind them to protect them from the Egyptians. For the entire night the cloud stayed there and prevented the Egyptians from drawing near to Bnei Yisrael. What occurred during that long night?

The Midrash teaches that a heavenly court case was being held. Bnei Yisrael were on trial. The prosecuting angel had a very strong case. He argued that it was not fair for Bnei Yisrael to be saved while the Egyptians were to be drowned because both nations worshipped idols!

The prosecuting angel's argument was very convincing. While in Egypt, Bnei Yisrael were also involved in idol worship just like the Egyptians. So why should they be treated any differently than the Egyptians? Yet Hashem rejected this argument and defended Bnei Yisrael. Unlike the Egyptians, Bnei Yisrael did not voluntarily worship idols. They were only acting under duress of their taskmasters.

However, a very strong question arises – why didn't the prosecuting angel raise this argument when the Egyptians were struck with the ten plagues? Why didn't the prosecuting angel complain when Bnei Yisrael were unharmed by the plagues? Why didn't he complain when the Egyptian first born were killed while the Jewish first born were not harmed? Why did he wait until so late in the piece to raise this issue?

The answer may lie in the interactions amongst Bnei Yisrael at the time that they were trapped between the sea and the Egyptian army, as described above. This was the first example of serious disunity and lack of peace amongst Bnei Yisrael. During the period of the plagues, there was a sense of unity amongst Bnei Yisrael, fostered or enhanced perhaps by their common situation of enslavement and the miracles that Hashem had brought about for their benefit. This

¹ "Let My Nation Go" by Yosef Deutsch, p337-338, based on the Sefer HaYashar.

unity amongst Bnei Yisrael may have protected them from the prosecuting angel.² While they were camped at the sea, the lack of peace was the opening that the prosecuting angel needed. This was his chance, and he grabbed it. Thankfully he was not successful.

We learn from this incident the special protection that we merit from peaceful relations. The Shechinah (Divine Presence) only rests on the Jewish people when there is unity amongst us. When there is conflict the Shechinah departs.³ Of course there is nothing wrong with disagreement. It is inevitable. There are many situations when reasonable people will disagree as to the appropriate course of action. But we have to disagree respectfully and with concern for each other's feelings. We can still argue our point very forcefully, but we need to do it in the right way.

We can learn the same lesson from the comparison of the generation of King David with the generation of King Achav (the seventh king of the northern kingdom of Israel). In previous editions of Darchai Noam we have discussed the Midrashic comparison of these generations.⁴ In the time of King David, all of the people were righteous and learned in Torah, yet they suffered heavy casualties when they went to war. In contrast, the generation of King Achav was idolatrous, but suffered very few casualties when they went to war. The Midrash explains that the people in King Achav's kingdom merited a special protection from Hashem because they behaved respectfully towards each other, even though they were idol worshippers.

If we want to merit this special protection against the prosecuting angel regarding our own sins, we can start by working on our achdut (unity) and shalom. As Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaCohen Kook, the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi in the times of the British Mandate, has been quoted as saying⁵:

"There is no such thing as "baseless love". Why is it baseless? He is a Jew, and I am obligated to honour him. There is only "baseless hatred", but baseless love? No!"

Internalising this message may assist us to work towards shalom and unity with every person with whom we interact.

Let's try something this week:

1. The next time that we have a dispute, remember the prosecuting angel and make an effort to speak to the other side with respect.
2. When we disagree with another's point of view, we should try to give the other side a chance to present their point of view and listen to them respectfully. By being calm and assertive rather than aggressive, we can improve our chances of maintaining shalom and ultimately remembering that each of us is a fellow Jew created by the same creator.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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² The link between the disunity of Bnei Yisrael at the Yam Suf and the Heavenly court case that occurred that night is not my idea. Unfortunately I cannot remember in whose name I heard this idea.

³ The Vilna Gaon's commentary on Mishlei (6:19)

⁴ Vayikra Raba

⁵ "An Angel Amongst Men", Simcha Raz

About Darchai Noam

The passuk 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'reiacha kamocho' – loving one's fellow as oneself.

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