

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat B'shalach
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

B'shalach – Stay away from Mitzrayim

In this week's Parsha of B'shalach, Bnei Yisrael finally leave Mitzrayim for good. But before they break completely free from the clutches of their former masters, there is one final, dramatic confrontation – on the bank of the Reed Sea. When Hashem splits the sea, Bnei Yisrael can travel through the sea on dry land, whereas Hashem causes the entire Egyptian army to drown. Finally, the long and painful slavery reaches its final chapter.

Let us focus on the events immediately before the splitting of the sea. The Egyptian army has given chase and is now bearing down on the helpless and frightened Bnei Yisrael. In a panic Bnei Yisrael call out to Moshe: *“It is better than we should serve Egypt than that we should die in the Wilderness!”*¹ Moshe responds: *“Don't be afraid! Stand firm and see Hashem's salvation that He will perform for you today, for as you have seen Egypt today, you shall not see them ever again!”*²

Moshe's response sounds like a promise. However, the Ramban explains that it is actually a mitzva – a negative commandment – forbidding Bnei Yisrael from ever returning to dwell in Egypt.³ The Ramban adds that Hashem is commanding us that we shall not *willingly* live in Egypt. The word “willingly” is a significant addition because the Torah itself warns us that we might be punished and be brought back to Egypt forcibly.⁴ Of course, a forcible return cannot be covered by the prohibition.

Indeed, counted among the 613 mitzvot is a commandment forbidding us from settling in the land of Egypt. The Rambam counts this as Negative Commandment number 46.⁵ The Rambam says that this prohibition appears three times throughout the Torah, one of which is Shmot 14:13, which we quoted above.⁶ The Rambam adds that one may *visit* Egypt, for instance to do business or to pass through to another land, but one may not return there to live.

Interestingly, the Rambam himself lived in Egypt for more than half of his life! After escaping the oppressive Moslem regime in Spain, he tried to live in the Land of Israel but conditions were too difficult at that time. He was forced to live in Egypt where he thrived and became the head of the Jewish community and physician to the royal family. Clearly the Rambam knew the halacha and he did not live in Egypt by choice. It is recorded that he would sign his letters “Moshe ben Maimon, who transgresses three prohibitions each day”.⁷

In his Sefer Hamitzvot, the Rambam provides us with a reason for this mitzva - so that we should not learn from the heresy of the Egyptians and not come to imitate their wicked behaviour.

The Ramban in his commentary to the Torah and the Rambam in his Sefer Hamitzvot also quote the third pasuk which prohibits living in Egypt: *“[The King (of Israel)] may not acquire many horses for himself, so that he will not bring the people back to Egypt in order to acquire many horses, for Hashem said to you, “You shall not return that way any more.”*⁸

At that time, Egypt was the world centre of horse breeding. Hashem commanded Jewish kings not to have too many horses because that would necessitate dealing with Mitzrayim. (The Torah contains three prohibitions for a Jewish king – not to have too many horses, too much wealth and too many wives.) Hashem did not want Jewish kings to focus too

¹ Shmot 14:12

² Shmot 14:13

³ Gemara Yerushalmi Succah 5:1, Mechilta.

⁴ See Devarim 28:68 which deals with the “tochacha” – the punishments that will befall Bnei Yisrael if they sin.

⁵ In the Rambam's Sefer Hamitzvot.

⁶ The other two sources are Devarim 17:16 (see below in the main article) and Devarim 28:68 “Hashem will bring you back to Egypt in ships, along the way that I told you not to ever see again” (see footnote 4 above).

⁷ This is referring to three pasukim listed above which prohibit Bnei Yisrael from living in Egypt.

⁸ Devarim 17:16

much on their wealth and possessions. Returning to Egypt would mean returning to a number of influences that are not conducive to the Jewish way of life, including a life that is more materialistic and less spiritual.

Many commentators note that the Hebrew name for Egypt (Mitzrayim) comes from the word מיצר meaning “narrow” or “constricted”. Israel on the other hand, is called a “good and broad land”.⁹ However this appears to be the opposite of reality! Israel is a narrow strip of land and Egypt is far wider geographically. The modern state of Egypt is about 48 times the size of Israel!¹⁰

As an aside, this apparent physical narrowness of Israel is really an illusion. The Gemara¹¹ teaches us that the land of Israel actually expands to contain the people who live there. This is similar to the miracle that would occur in the Bet Hamikdash – when all of Bnei Yisrael would gather for the three pilgrimage festivals there was barely enough room for everyone to stand. However, when it came time to bow down there was miraculously enough space for everyone to bow down comfortably.¹²

However, the words “constricted” and “broad” in the description of Mitzrayim and the Land of Israel are not merely a physical description. Mitzrayim is a place of *spiritual* constriction. Israel is a place of *spiritual* expansion. We are being commanded not to return to a place of spiritual constriction.

As we read in the Haggadah every Pesach – in each generation we must look upon ourselves as if we personally left Mitzrayim.¹³ Leaving Mitzrayim was not just a historical event. But how can we view this event as personal to us? The answer is that we must understand it in a spiritual sense, not just in a physical sense. In other words, we are all required to leave our personal Mitzrayim – that is, the place that uniquely constricts us and holds us back from reaching our potential. We must leave such a place and, as we saw above, we are *commanded* to not return to such a place.

We all need to discover what is our own Mitzrayim. We need to work hard on leaving that constriction behind us and taking special care not to return there. One way of being restricted is acting as though we are bound by the confines of nature. The opposite of this view would be an expansive one, based on emunah or trust. The following idea from Rabbi Akiva Tatz provides a suggestion as to what it could mean to live a life that is free of constriction and narrowness.

Rabbi Tatz points out a fascinating insight revealed in the Nishmat Kol Chai prayer¹⁴. The prayer sets out at length that it is absolutely impossible for us to give adequate praise to Hashem. Even if “our mouths were as full of song as the sea”, “our lips as full of praise as the breadth of the sea”, “our hands as outspread as eagles of the sky and our feet as swift as deer” we could still not thank Hashem sufficiently. However, then the prayer says: “*Therefore*, the organs that You placed within us, and the spirit and soul that You breathed into our nostrils, and the tongue that you placed into our mouth – all of them shall thank and bless, praise and glorify...”. The word ‘therefore’ seems out of place. It would make more sense to say: “Despite the fact that this is impossible, we will try anyway”. But according to the way the prayer is worded, we have just stated that something is impossible to do, and then we say, *therefore* we are going to do it!

Rabbi Tatz teaches that this prayer reveals a powerful lesson about the Jewish approach to life. We believe with perfect faith that Hashem is in charge of all outcomes. We just have to put in the effort (our hishtadlut), even if we feel that achieving the desired outcome is impossible. We don’t need to concern ourselves with whether something is achievable or realistic because we believe that Hashem will make it happen if it is His will. Our job is simply to decide what is right according to Hashem and His Torah, and then just do it. That is an example of living emunah, which enables us to rise above the confines of nature and this world.

Let’s try something this week:

1. Remember the mitzva that we learn from this week’s Parasha – it is forbidden to return to Mitzrayim. That applies to us as well (in a physical and spiritual sense)!
2. Try to discover what is our own personal Mitzrayim i.e. what is holding us back from being expansive. Then try to leave it behind.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

⁹ Shmot 3:8.

¹⁰ Of course, the size of Israel and Egypt in ancient times were different than they are now. However, this figure just gives us an idea of the difference in size of the two countries.

¹¹ Gittin 57a.

¹² Pirkai Avot 5:5.

¹³ Gemara Pesachim 116b.

¹⁴ This beautiful prayer is recited at the end of Pesukai D’zimrah on Shabbat and Yom Tov mornings and also on the Seder night. See page 400 of the standard Artscroll Ashkenaz siddur.