

DARCHAI NOAM

Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Yitro, January 2014

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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Yitro - Unity!

In this week's Parasha of Yitro, Bnei Yisrael camp around Har Sinai to receive the Torah.

The verbs used to describe Bnei Yisrael's actions (they *travelled*, they *arrived*, they *camped* in the desert) are all in the plural, which is grammatically correct. However, when Bnei Yisrael arrives at Har Sinai, the verb form changes to singular:

They journeyed (plural) from Rephidim, and they arrived (plural) in the dessert of Sinai, and they encamped (plural) in the desert, and Israel camped (singular) there opposite the mountain. (Sh'mot 19:2)

A well-known Rashi points out that usage of the singular verb indicates that Bnei Yisrael were camped in unity – they were like one person with one heart. According to the Midrash,¹ it is precisely because of this peace and unity that Bnei Yisrael merited receiving the Torah.

This clearly demonstrates how important it is for us to have peace and unity amongst ourselves. Yet sometimes people can be united for a negative purpose. In last week's Parasha, when the Egyptians were advancing towards Bnei Yisrael at the Reed Sea, the singular verb is also used (Sh'mot 14:10). Rashi explains the significance of the singular verb in the same manner - the Egyptians were like one person with one heart, united in their desire to capture Bnei Yisrael and bring them back into slavery. Such unity is clearly negative. It is much better to be united for a positive purpose – like the common desire of Bnei Yisrael to receive the Torah from Hashem.

The question that we might ask is which is more significant, the unity or the purpose for which the people are united? To answer this question, let's explore the Midrash in Vayikra Raba which compares the generation of King David with the generation of King Achav (the seventh king of the northern kingdom of Israel). In the time of King David, all of the people were very learned in Torah, however when they went out to war they suffered heavy casualties. In contrast, the generation of King Achav was idolatrous. However they suffered very few casualties when they went out to war. The Midrash explains that in the generation of King David social behaviour was not up to scratch. However the people in King Achav's kingdom behaved respectfully towards each other.

We see a similar theme emerging from a comparison between the people that were destroyed in the flood at the time of Noach, and the generation that built the Tower of Babel. As Rashi points out (Breishit 11:9), the people that drowned in the flood were robbers. There was strife between them. In contrast, the generation of the Tower of Babel were united. They behaved with love and friendship towards each other. Even though they built the tower in an attempt to battle against Hashem himself, their punishment was milder. They were not wiped out like the generation of the flood.

Obviously, it is better to be unified for a positive purpose rather than unified for a negative purpose. But the above examples reveal that unity is a merit in its own right and it is possibly even more significant than the underlying purpose for which the people are united. It is certainly something worth striving for.

¹ Tanna D'vei Eliyahu

To understand why this is so, let us try to imagine how Hashem feels (so to speak) when he sees us acting towards each other with peace and unity.

Rabbi Paysach Krohn tells the following powerful story. Once there was a man who had two sons. The sons grew up and moved far away from home. The younger son fell upon hard times and he came to his older brother for some help. The older brother was not interested in providing help. He was angry at his younger brother for something that had happened many years earlier. The younger brother had no other source of assistance and he suffered greatly. After a number of years, the father became ill. His end was nearing. The older brother raced to be at his father's side before it was too late. When he got there, his younger brother had already arrived. Ignoring his brother, he went straight to his father's side. However his father did not recognise him. With tears in his eyes, the older brother tried desperately to get his father to recognise him. "Father, it's me, your son. Please remember me". Eventually his father said: "You can't be my son. My son had a brother. If you don't have a brother, then you can't be my son".

When a parent sees their children getting on well with each other, they are filled with joy. On the other hand, when a parent sees dissension between their children, it can be heartbreaking. We are all Hashem's children. If we are unified and act towards each other in a peaceful manner, we are giving Hashem nachat and joy. What a wonderful thing to do!

But it is not always an easy thing to do. How can we have achdut (unity) in difficult situations? For instance, there are often people with whom our personalities clash, even within our immediate family. There are people with whom we have fundamental disagreements on matters of extreme importance. How can we possibly hope to get on with people who are so different to us?

We can learn from the seventh plague of hail which we read about in Parashat Vaera.² The Midrash tells us that this was no ordinary hail. Inside each hailstone was a burning fire. If something escaped destruction from the hail it was burnt by the fire. This was totally miraculous. How could the fire and the ice co-exist? They are exact opposites. The fire should have melted the ice and the water should have extinguished the fire. Similarly, when two people are opposites, we would expect the stronger one to dominate the weaker one. What is the secret of the hail? The answer is that the fire and the ice were both unified in serving the will of Hashem. They each managed to powerfully achieve their purpose however they didn't harm each other because they were both nullified by submitting to a higher power. In the presence of Hashem, their own differences became unimportant.

We can learn from this. When we come against people that we struggle to get on with, we should focus on the greater goal of bringing shalom to the world and giving Hashem nachat. Our differences should naturally fade in deference to this higher goal.

Let's try something this week:

1. When we meet someone that we clash with, remember the story about the two brothers.
2. Imagine how much joy you will bring to Hashem if you can act towards this person in a peaceful manner.
3. Think about the generation of King Achav and the generation of the Tower of Babel. Remember that we receive special Heavenly protection if we are able to act towards others in a peaceful manner. The more we dislike the person, and the harder it is for us to live in shalom with them, the greater will be our reward. So make the effort!

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Allon Ledder

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² This idea was heard from one of my teachers, Rabbi Dovid Tsap.

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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