

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?

Yitro – Proof that we are the chosen people

In this week's Parsha of Yitro, Bnei Yisrael stand at the foot of Har Sinai to experience the Divine revelation and receive the Aseret Hadibrot. We will hear the Aseret Hadibrot recited at shule as part of the Torah reading. Receiving the Torah at Har Sinai is the real purpose for which the Exodus took place. Moshe didn't just ask Pharaoh to "Let my people go". He asked Pharaoh to "Let my people go so that they may serve me". We were thus freed from Mitzrayim so that we could serve Hashem.

In the Gemara we learn the principle of "somech tefillah l'geulah". We place prayer next to redemption¹. We see this principle in practice just before the recitation of the Shemoneh Esreh in Shacharit. The last bracha that we recite just before the Shemoneh Esreh is the bracha of "Ga'al Yisrael" – *Blessed are you Hashem, Who redeemed Israel*. We are prohibited from having any interruptions between this bracha and the commencement of Shemoneh Esreh². Many Chazzanim have the custom to recite Ga'al Yisrael silently, so that the congregation won't have to answer Amen, which would constitute an interruption. This bracha refers to our redemption from Mitzrayim. The prayer of Shemoneh Esreh constitutes our service to Hashem in the absence of the Bet Hamikdash. Therefore we strive to avoid any break whatsoever between our recitation regarding redemption and our service of Hashem. Redemption naturally and immediately flows into service. Ensuring this continuity in our davening is a tangible demonstration that the sole purpose of the redemption is to serve Hashem.

The Rambam³ states that our belief in Moshe Rabbeinu and the Torah is not reliant on the miracles that Moshe performed. People may entertain a doubt in their heart and believe that the miracles were performed by magic or trickery. There are many people throughout history who have claimed to do miracles. However, these miracles are often revealed as tricks. Even the splitting of the sea has been explained by some as a natural occurrence. According to the Rambam, the only reason that we believe in the veracity of Moshe and the Torah is because the entire Jewish nation were present at Har Sinai and they saw and heard the Divine Revelation with their very own eyes and ears. It seems that the source for this Rambam is in our Parsha:

"Hashem said to Moshe: 'Behold I will come to you in the thickness of the cloud so that the people will hear me speak to you and also so that they will believe in you forever'".
(Shemot 19:9)

But how do we as future generations know that the Divine Revelation at Har Sinai actually took place and that we are the Chosen People?⁴ Rabbi Lawrence Keleman points out that the revelation at Har Sinai is a unique occurrence in world history. There is no other religion that began with a Divine Revelation claimed to have been witnessed by an entire nation. Every other

¹ See Gemara Brachot 4b.

² See page 96 of the standard Artscroll Ashkenazi siddur.

³ Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah, Ch 8.

⁴ The following argument appears in the Kuzari by Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi, as explained by Rabbi Zev Leff and Rabbi Lawrence Keleman in audio shiurim.

religion began with one person (or sometimes two people) that claim to have had a divine revelation. Though it is possible to fabricate a divine revelation to one or two people, it is completely implausible to fabricate such a story to an entire nation and have them believe it.

Let us explore this further. Before Moshe's death he gathers the entire nation together and reiterates the Divine Revelation at Har Sinai which took place before approximately 3 million people.⁵ At that point, not one person denies that this revelation took place. The story has been passed on from parents to children over many generations. Even the Christians and the Moslems believe in this story (though they argue that the covenant between Hashem and Bnei Yisrael no longer applies). Therefore, if one were to argue that the Divine Revelation at Har Sinai was false, one would have to prove the veracity of one of the following points:

1. Bnei Yisrael were fooled into believing that they experienced the Divine Revelation; or
2. The story was fabricated by Moshe or by a charlatan or group of people that wrote the Torah; or
3. A charismatic leader came along many years later and convinced Bnei Yisrael that their ancestors had experienced this event many years ago.

Option 1 lacks veracity because Bnei Yisrael were a nation of approximately 3 million people. It is inconceivable that such a large number of people could be tricked into believing that they had experienced a Divine Revelation.

Option 2 is also extremely difficult to believe. If Bnei Yisrael were presented with a book that contained such a story they would immediately say: "If my ancestors had experienced a Divine Revelation, why hadn't I heard of this before? Surely something as important as this would be passed down by parents to children." A nation would not accept such a far-fetched story in the absence of an oral tradition that it had actually taken place.

Option 3 is slightly more plausible. Many years later, a charismatic leader could gather together a following and convince them that their ancestors had experienced a Divine Revelation and for some reason the tradition had been lost. People can be very gullible. However the problem with this possibility is that we have very detailed records of the chain of tradition going all the way back to Moshe. If there was such a person who arose many years after Har Sinai, surely there should be a record of such a person in our history books. But there is no record of such a person.

Rabbi Lawrence Keleman convincingly argues that it is completely implausible that such a momentous historical event that took place before 3 million people could be fabricated. Bnei Yisrael experienced the Divine Revelation at Har Sinai and we received the Torah as Hashem's Chosen People.

Let's try something this week:

1. As we stand up to hear the 10 commandments at shule this Shabbat, remember that we are re-enacting the Divine Revelation that took place at Har Sinai.
2. Remember how fortunate we are to be part of the Chosen People. Hashem chose us to be his special nation. This can only help with our own feelings of self-worth and also the way that we look at our fellow Jews.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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⁵ See the beginning of Parshat Vaetchanan.

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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