

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 – regaining clarity

In this week's Parsha of Yitro, Bnei Yisrael receive the Torah at Har Sinai. This is the only time in the history of the world that Hashem reveals himself to an entire nation. It is difficult to even imagine how awe-inspiring and magnificent this event was.

*“And all of the people **saw the sounds** and the flames and the sound of the shofar and the smoking mountain; the people saw and they trembled and they stood from afar.”¹*

How can the people **see** sounds? Rashi explains that the ‘sounds’ refers to the words that emerged from Hashem’s ‘mouth’. On a plain reading of the pasuk, it seems that Bnei Yisrael **saw** the words of Hashem and saw the sounds of the shofar. Rashi quotes the Midrash which states that Bnei Yisrael actually saw that which is audible, something which is usually impossible.

To try to understand what this means, let's explore the difference between seeing and hearing, two very different modes of perception.²

Seeing is experienced all at once. Looking at a complex picture provides us in one instant with a complete mental image of the whole scene. On the other hand, hearing is experienced one word at a time. To transmit an idea through speech we need to hear each distinct word separately one after another. The meaning only becomes clear once we have heard all the words and internalised the message. The saying “a picture is worth a thousand words” represents the notion that to accurately describe a picture with words can take many words and a long time.

Seeing is also generally considered a better proof than hearing. Witnessing an event with our own eyes usually feels more verifiable than if we just heard about it. Hearing is subjective - we have to put together the components and interpret the meaning of the words. Seeing is more external and objective. It is true, there are optical illusions, and sometimes our eyes can play tricks on us, but generally “seeing is believing”. That is why the Hebrew word for seeing (R'iyā) is almost identical to the Hebrew word for proof (R'ayā). Both words are written as ראייה.

Our eyes can help us to see what is happening in the physical world around us. However, our eyes can't help us to ‘see’ the spiritual world. We can't see souls, angels, or Hashem. Our sense of hearing helps us to perceive the spiritual world – we need to talk about ideas and concepts. That is why the physical world feels more real to us and the spiritual world can feel very abstract.

Let's try to apply this idea to what happened at Har Sinai. Hashem peeled back reality and revealed Himself. Bnei Yisrael literally felt as if they were standing in front of Hashem. The spiritual world became real to them. It was as if they ‘saw’ the spiritual world with their eyes. They were on such a high level that they could perceive the unity behind everything. They perceived Hashem's existence and His One-ness with absolute clarity. When Hashem spoke to Bnei

¹ Sh'mot 20:15

² These ideas are based on a talk by Rabbi Akiva Tatz.

Yisrael, His words were as tangible to Bnei Yisrael as if they could 'see' them. Everything was crystal clear and absolutely proven. The best way to describe what Bnei Yisrael experienced is with the verb of 'seeing'. Using the analogy of sight helps us who haven't experienced such a revelation to relate to this.

When we read the written word, we are using our eyes. However we only see one word at a time. The mental process to internalise the message acts in the same way as when we listen to the spoken word. In a sense, we are 'hearing with our eyes'. It seems that we can also 'see with our ears'! Bnei Yisrael heard Hashem speak at Har Sinai but they had absolute clarity – the clarity that is normally obtained through seeing.

Today, this clarity can seem very far away. We live in a complicated and confusing world with many options and doubts. It is often difficult for us to know what is right and how to behave. How complicated is the world that we live in? The old Rubik's cube has become popular again in Israeli schools. The solution guide provides us with an interesting fact. If you make a singlet turn of one of the cube's faces every second, it would take you 1,400 trillion years to go through all the possible configurations! And the real world is vastly more complicated and confusing than a simple Rubik's cube puzzle.

Most of us crave clarity and find it reassuring. How can we recapture some of that clarity that Bnei Yisrael had at Har Sinai? Where can we turn to for guidance? Though we can no longer access the Har Sinai experience directly, Hashem gave us the Torah as our guide book and the Rabbis as our guides. We can turn to the Torah to know what Hashem wants from us at any given moment. And we can turn to the Rabbis who are best placed to give us guidance that is consistent with Torah values.

But in order to even know what we are confused about, we must know ourselves. To know ourselves, our challenges, our questions better we need to reflect on and review our lives regularly and ask Hashem for guidance.

The Ramchal advises as follows in Derech Eitz Chaim:

“A person goes by so many years of his life thinking about all kinds of things. Why can't he think at least an hour a day about who he is and why he came into this world, and what Hashem wants from him? And what will be his end? This is the greatest remedy against the Yetzer Hara. It is easy to do and the results are tremendous. A person, every day, should empty out all his thoughts for an hour a day.”

The Torah is more than just a book of rules relating to ritualistic commandments. The Torah has answers to every aspect of our lives – from how we conduct our business to how we relate to each other. If we want to re-capture the clarity that Bnei Yisrael experienced at Har Sinai, we need to turn to the only objective source of guidance that Hashem has given to us, His Torah.

Let's try something this week:

1. Set aside a regular period of time out of our day to reflect on where we are going and what Hashem wants us to do.
2. Seek out the answers to our life's questions from the Torah.
3. Consult a Rabbi to maximise clarity in relation to ritual mitzvot, daily issues and life direction.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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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're'echa kamocho' – loving one's fellow as oneself.

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