

## DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

### “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Yitro, February 2017

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

### Yitro – Bnei Yisrael’s most difficult mitzvah

In this week’s Parsha of Yitro, we read about the revelation at Har Sinai where Bnei Yisrael receive the Torah. There is a well-known Midrash that explains why Hashem chose Bnei Yisrael.

*“R’ Yochanan says... Hashem offered the Torah to every nation and every tongue, but none accepted it, until He came to Israel who received it.”* (Gemara, Avoda Zara 2b)

The Midrash<sup>1</sup> elaborates that the other nations wanted to know what was in the Torah before they accepted it. Hashem responded by quoting one of the mitzvot from the Torah. However the sample mitzvah that He revealed to each nation was the particular mitzvah that would be most difficult for that nation to accept<sup>2</sup>. For instance:

- Hashem revealed to the children of Eisav that the Torah contains the prohibition against murder. They consequently rejected the Torah because murder was part of the heritage left to them by Eisav, as it says in Yitzchak’s blessing to Eisav ‘and you shall live by your sword’<sup>3</sup>.
- Hashem informed the children of Ammon and Moab (descendants of Lot) that the Torah contains the prohibition against illicit relations. The Ammonites and Moabites rejected the Torah since illicit relations were part of their natural make-up since their inception. (See the story of Lot and his two daughters in Breishit chapter 19.)
- Hashem chose to reveal the prohibition against theft to the children of Ishmael. They replied that theft was integral to their economy. Before Ishmael was born, his mother Hagar was told prophetically by an angel “He will be a wild ass of a man, his hand against everyone.”<sup>4</sup>

In contrast, when Hashem offered the Torah to Bnei Yisrael, they did not ask any questions. Rather, they simply replied: “Na’aseh v’nishma!” “Everything that Hashem has said, we will do and we will obey.”<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the other nations can raise a complaint against Bnei Yisrael. The other nations were informed of the very mitzvah that would have been the hardest for them to obey and that is why they rejected the Torah. However this was not the case with Bnei Yisrael. Why weren’t Bnei Yisrael similarly tested?

One answer to this complaint is to point out that Bnei Yisrael were not tested in this way because they did not even inquire about the contents of the Torah before accepting it. Unlike the other

<sup>1</sup> This Midrash appears in a number of places, e.g. Sifrei Devarim 343, Mechilta d’Rabbi Ishmael, Shmot 20:2.

<sup>2</sup> Some commentators explain that this Midrash is not to be understood literally. For example, the Maharal explains that Hashem didn’t actually offer the Torah to the other nations but He knew that they would reject it if it was offered to them.

<sup>3</sup> Breishit 27:40.

<sup>4</sup> Breishit 16:12.

<sup>5</sup> Shmot 24:7.

nations, Bnei Yisrael did not provide Hashem with an opportunity to test them. Rather, Bnei Yisrael trusted Hashem implicitly and were willing to accept Hashem's Torah sight unseen.

However, the Chidushei HaRim<sup>6</sup> suggests that before Bnei Yisrael received the Torah Hashem actually did give them a test similar to the test that he gave the other nations. He gave Bnei Yisrael the mitzvah that would be most difficult for them to keep.

Before the revelation, Hashem warned Moshe to set up boundaries around Har Sinai to make sure that no-one would get too close to the mountain.

*"You shall set boundaries for the people... whoever touches the mountain shall surely die..."*<sup>7</sup>

Hashem repeats this prohibition to Moshe, telling him once again to warn the people not to get too close.<sup>8</sup>

How is this prohibition of coming too close to Har Sinai the most challenging of all the mitzvot for Bnei Yisrael to keep? Bnei Yisrael had just experienced the most amazing rescue from Mitzrayim. Hashem saved them and performed the miracle of the splitting of the sea for them. They experienced a revelation of Hashem that was greater than that experienced by the prophets. They spent 49 days preparing themselves spiritually so that they could be at the level to merit the Divine Revelation at Har Sinai. With such spiritual strength and having witnessed so many miracles first-hand, it would be natural and tempting for Bnei Yisrael to run up the mountain in order to get as close as possible to the Source! It would have been very difficult for Bnei Yisrael to hold themselves back. That is why Hashem had to warn them more than once not to get too close. Perhaps, for Bnei Yisrael, this command was equivalent to the children of Eisav being told not to murder and the children of Ishmael being told not to steal.

This incident reveals two important lessons that are relevant for our Avodat Hashem.

1. It is the nature of Bnei Yisrael that we should want to develop the closest possible relationship with Hashem. This is part of our spiritual make-up and part of the heritage that our ancestors have left us. However it is easy for us to forget this due to the many distractions that occupy our attention.
2. In our earnest quest for spirituality and closeness to Hashem, we may forget that we are not the ones who make the laws. It is not our perspective that matters, only Hashem's. If we run closer to Hashem than He wants us to then we are really worshipping ourselves and our own egos, not Him and His laws. We can trip up by taking on more than Hashem has commanded us just like we can trip up by taking on less or rejecting his Mitzvot.

Let's try something this week:

1. Remember that, as members of Bnei Yisrael, developing a relationship with Hashem should come naturally to us.
2. Though it is admirable to increase our connection to Hashem, we must follow His boundaries and limits. We must serve Him on His terms and not on our terms.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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<sup>6</sup> Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Rotenberg-Alter (1799 - 1866), the first Rebbe of the Ger Hasidic dynasty.

<sup>7</sup> Shmot 19:12.

<sup>8</sup> See Shmot 21-25.

## **About Darchai Noam**

The pasuk 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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