

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?

Vayakhel – the importance of unity

This week's Parsha of Vayakhel is read the week after the terrible sin of the Golden Calf – the Egel Hazahav. How could such a sin have occurred? And what is the appropriate way to move forward and do teshuva?

Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky explains that when the Jewish people sinned with the Egel Hazahav, they acted in the opposite way to their behaviour at the revelation at Har Sinai.¹ Only 5 weeks ago, in Parshat Yitro we read about Bnei Yisrael camping at Har Sinai in perfect unity "like one person with one heart"². According to the Midrash,³ it is precisely because of this peace and unity that Bnei Yisrael merited receiving the Torah.

However, at the time of the Egel Hazahav, there was total disunity between Bnei Yisrael. In his commentary on last week's Parsha, the Ramban notes that the people actually wanted **multiple** idols to worship. Some sources⁴ indicate that Bnei Yisrael made twelve calves because they could not even agree on which calf to serve! Each tribe (except Levi⁵) created their own golden calf.

Thus, unity led to the revelation at Har Sinai – the single most important event in the history of the Jewish people. Disunity led to the Golden Calf – the lowest point in the history of the Jewish people.

If disunity was one of the causes of the sin, then perhaps a return to unity is an antidote and one of the best ways to move forward. This is precisely what Moshe encourages in the first passuk of this week's Parsha:

*'Moshe gathered **the entire assembly** of the Children of Israel and said to them "These are the things that Hashem commanded to do them"'. (Sh'mot 35:1)*

Moshe assembles all of Bnei Yisrael together and instructs them to work together to build the Mishkan, as commanded by Hashem. Working together in unity helps Bnei Yisrael to rectify one of the underlying causes of the Egel Hazahav.

When Yaakov Avinu was about to face Eisav after leaving Lavan, he was understandably frightened. The previous time they had seen each other Eisav had sworn to kill Yaakov for stealing the blessings from their father Yitzchak. Yaakov prayed to Hashem:

'Rescue me please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Eisav...'
(Breishit 32:12)

¹ This idea was seen in "Short Vort" by Rabbi Moshe Kormornick, p94.

² Rashi to Sh'mot 19:2.

³ Tanna D'vei Eliyahu.

⁴ Gemara Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 10:2.

⁵ If Levi isn't counted then Yosef counts as 2 tribes (ie Menashe and Ephraim).

Why did Yaakov mention “my brother” and “Eisav” separately? The commentators⁶ explain that Yaakov had two concerns. First, that Eisav still intended to kill Yaakov and his family. Second, he worried that Eisav would act more like a brother and try to befriend Yaakov. This latter scenario may lead Yaakov and his family to become exposed to Eisav’s influences. Yaakov understood that this was also a risk. Not a physical risk, but a spiritual risk. Today, unfortunately, the rates of assimilation and intermarriage demonstrate the risks of being welcomed into non-Jewish society.

Let’s explore which of Yaakov’s concerns is more dangerous to the continuity of the Jewish people. In the early 1800s in Eastern Europe, the Jewish community in Russia was suffering terrible persecution under the Romanov dynasty. At the same time, Napoleon was busy conquering territories throughout Europe and granting them liberal reforms. This liberalisation under Napoleon could bring a life of greater comfort and ease to the long-suffering Jewish community of Russia and Eastern Europe. When Napoleon turned his attention to Russia in 1807, the leaders of the Jewish community had to decide whether to support him or the existing Russian empire. As well as providing political and logistical support, when the Jews would turn to Hashem in prayer the question was which army should they pray for? Remarkably, the Rabbis chose to support Russia.

The Rabbis had a deep understanding of human nature and the risks of freedom and assimilation. In addition, historically, the Jewish people tend to be much more unified in times of persecution. We can see this phenomenon clearly. Though there are numerous political factions, as soon as the Jewish people are under threat all differences are put aside and we all come together. The Rabbis in Russia understood the critical nature of this unity. The Vilna Gaon⁷ explains that the Jewish people are granted a special protection when we have peaceful relations amongst ourselves. The Shechinah (Divine Presence) only rests on the Jewish people when there is unity. When there is conflict the Shechinah departs. This same phenomenon also occurs in our houses and with the members of our family.

Ideally we would much prefer to achieve this level of unity without the need for external pressure in the form of persecution and common enemies. It would be wonderful if we could show Hashem that we can achieve ‘V’ahavta l’rei’echa kamocho’ without Him having to force us into it by unifying us through a common enemy.

Let’s try something this week:

In order to accomplish unity without the need for enemies, let’s all choose one person who we are having a conflict with and try our best to restore a peaceful relationship. This might involve humbling ourselves. It might involve forgiving someone totally even though we don’t believe they deserve forgiveness. And it might involve apologising even though we don’t think we did anything wrong. It may not be easy, but each individual act of shalom contributes to the overall unity of the Jewish people.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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⁶ Pardes Yosef, quoting the Yalkut Shimoni; see Rav Frand on Parshat Vayishlach:

www.torah.org/learning/ravfrand/5757/vayishlach.html

⁷ Commentary to Mishlei (6:19)

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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