

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Beha'alotcha, June 2017

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Beha'alotcha – Hashem hates hypocrisy

This week's Parsha of Beha'alotcha contains the famous upside-down letter 'nun's which appear straight after the section of the text dealing with the journey from Har Sinai.¹ These 'nun's seem to act as brackets separating a brief passage from the surrounding text. The relevant passage outlines what Moshe would say when the Aron Hakodesh was travelling and what he would say when it rested.² The Gemara³ explains that this passage is actually out of place. It really belongs in the passage dealing with the placement of the tribes which we read two weeks ago in Parshat Bamidbar.⁴ Yet, Hashem Himself instructed Moshe to write this passage over here. Why?

Rashi explains that this passage was deliberately written here to make a break between the Torah's recounting of Bnei Yisrael's sins⁵. Hashem did not want the recording of the sins to reflect so poorly on Bnei Yisrael. The following three sins are referred to in close succession in the text:

1. Bnei Yisrael left Har Sinai with a hurried joy. They wanted to avoid being given any more commandments, like young children that leave school quickly when the lesson is finished, before the teacher can give them any more homework.⁶
2. Bnei Yisrael complained about their difficult journey in the desert. They failed to appreciate that Hashem in His kindness allowed them to cover a distance of three days travel in only one day. Hashem was trying to help Bnei Yisrael enter the Holy Land as quickly as possible. (Note - this was before the sin of the meraglim and the 40 year delay to the entry into the Land.)
3. Under the influence of the mixed rabble that accompanied them out of Mitzrayim, Bnei Yisrael complained about their diet. They were not satisfied with the miraculous manna and instead they demanded real meat.

(Incidentally, there is a common misconception that Bnei Yisrael were constantly sinning and 'testing Hashem' during their years in the desert. Yet, Rabbi Akiva Tatz points out that Bnei Yisrael actually only sinned ten times during their 40 year sojourn in the midbar⁷. That's a strike rate of one sin every four years! Admittedly some of the sins were quite serious (like the Golden Calf and the meraglim) but this statistic puts their behaviour into context. If only we could limit our sins to once every four years!)

There is a halachik concept known as 'chazaka' – that is, if something occurs three times it has halachik significance. The letter 'nun's and the out-of-place passage were strategically placed to provide a break in the recording of the above-mentioned three sins. Thereby the Torah avoids

¹ Bamidbar 10:33-34.

² Bamidbar 10:35-36, beginning 'Vayehi Binsoa HaAron'. We traditionally recite the first half of this passage when the Ark is opened to remove the Torah for the public reading.

³ Shabbat 116a.

⁴ Chapter 2 of Sefer Bamidbar.

⁵ See Rashi's commentary to Bamidbar 10:35.

⁶ This sin is hinted to in Bamidbar 10:33 "They journeyed from the mountain of Hashem". This is brought in the Midrash as quoted by the Ramban in his commentary to Bamidbar 10:35.

⁷ See Bamidbar 14:22 and Gemara Arachin 15a.

recording three sins in succession and the consequent suggestion that Bnei Yisrael had chazaka of being sinners.

Another question arises. Rabbi Zev Leff questions why the break was placed between the first two sins. In order to avoid chazaka, the break could equally have been placed between the narrative of the second and third sin for the same effect. Rav Leff points out that the first two sins reflect Bnei Yisrael in a particularly poor light because when read together they reveal the trait of hypocrisy. The first sin demonstrates how Bnei Yisrael were able to travel joyfully and quickly when it suits them. However, the second sin is characterised by them complaining about the difficult journey. Rav Leff suggests that Hashem put the break specifically between the first two sins to minimise the likelihood of Bnei Yisrael appearing as hypocritical.

If our behaviour is inconsistent with our outward appearance or our speech it can reflect very poorly on us. In some cases it may even cause a chilul Hashem. For example, some Jews appear to be religious on the outside, yet act in a manner that is decidedly 'unreligious'.

A Rabbi⁸ was once asked the following question: "Rabbi, I am very troubled when I see religious Jews who cheat on their taxes and are dishonest in their business dealings. How can you explain this behaviour?" The Rabbi replied: "Yes, I agree, it is very troubling. I am also troubled by religious Jews who desecrate Shabbat and don't keep kosher." "But Rabbi, those Jews aren't religious!" "Exactly, and neither are the Jews who cheat on their taxes!"

Hashem wants us to be consistent in our outward appearance and our behaviour. When we try to portray a certain image of holiness, yet act in an inconsistent manner, this shows that we care more about people's opinions about us than Hashem's opinion or that we do not fully trust that Hashem knows the truth about us. If we analyse our behaviour honestly and carefully, most of us will discover that we act hypocritically to some degree.

Chovot Halevavot (Duties of the Heart)⁹ teaches us that every single character trait has its time and place in our service of Hashem¹⁰. Even seemingly negative middot have a role to play in certain circumstances. For example, displaying anger can be appropriate when disciplining children. Pride can be appropriate when we feel proud to be Jewish. Pride can also help us to overcome a temptation to sin (e.g. we should think to ourselves "How can I possibly stoop so low as to do such an act. It's beneath me. I'm better than that!"). How can hypocrisy be a part of our divine service?

We are all masters at justifying our own poor behaviour. We naturally tend to paint our own behaviour in the best possible light but find it very easy to preach to others about the right thing to do. Perhaps we can take our natural hypocrisy of judging ourselves favourably and others harshly and reverse it! We can strive to be strict on ourselves but generous in our judgement of others. Surely this would be a form of hypocrisy of which Hashem would approve!

Let's try something this week:

1. Contemplate the lesson of the upside-down 'nun's and remember that Hashem dislikes hypocrisy.
2. Try to be a 'reverse-hypocrite'. Be empathetic and give others the benefit of the doubt. Simultaneously, we can strive to be strict and uncompromising in our own standards.
3. Try to read Gate 3, Chapter 10 of Chovot Halevavot to gain a better understanding of how we can use our middot to serve Hashem appropriately.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder.

⁸ If I am not mistaken, this story was told about Rabbi Berel Wein.

⁹ By R' Bachya ben Yoseph ibn Paquda.

¹⁰ See Gate 3, Chapter 10 of Chovot HaLevavot where the author lists a number of middot and explains when each trait is appropriate. (Page 341 of the Feldheim edition).

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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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