

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Sh'lach
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Sh'lach – Giving people hope

In this week's Parsha of Sh'lach, we read about the tragic story of the spies.

Bnei Yisrael are on the threshold of entering Eretz Yisrael. They are now a nation. They have been redeemed from Mitzrayim and they have received the Torah. All that is left is to enter the land that Hashem had promised to their forefathers. But they hesitate. The people decide that it would be prudent to send spies to scout out the land. Moshe is not happy with the idea, however he agrees to it. The Midrash¹ explains that Moshe readily agreed to send the spies in the hope that Bnei Yisrael would see that there was nothing to hide and that they would then drop the idea.

Ten out of the twelve spies come back with their negative report about the land. Bnei Yisrael accept this negative report and they lose all hope. They no longer believe that they will be able to conquer the land. Even though they had seen with their own eyes the miraculous salvation and the wondrous miracles that Hashem had performed for them. Everything looks bleak and hopeless. There is talk of appointing a new leader to take them back to Mitzrayim.

Hashem is very angry with the people but Moshe comes to the rescue and argues in Beni Yisrael's defence. (As an aside, we the Jewish people owe Moshe an eternal debt of gratitude for all the times that he saved us.) Hashem agrees to pardon Bnei Yisrael and not wipe them out, but he punishes them by refusing them entry to the land. Rather, He decrees that they will wander in the desert for 40 years and that generation will die out during that time. The spies who brought the negative report are punished with a miraculous and horrific death. Moshe reports back to Bnei Yisrael about Hashem's decision and they mourn greatly². They are devastated by what happened.

Bnei Yisrael decide to take measures into their own hands. They plan to enter Eretz Yisrael, insolently ignoring Moshe's warning that Hashem will not be with them. They suffer a crushing defeat. Now Bnei Yisrael feel truly hopeless. They believe that the entire exodus and all the work leading up to this moment was for nothing. They believe that they will continue to sin and that they will never make it into the Promised Land.

So what does Hashem do at this point? Hashem teaches Bnei Yisrael some of the halachot about korbanot that apply in Eretz Yisrael. The Torah prefaces these laws with the following words:

And Hashem said to Moshe saying, speak to Bnei Yisrael and say to them: “when you arrive in the land of your dwelling place that I am giving you...” (Bamidbar 15:1).

Hashem also teaches Bnei Yisrael about the laws of challah (separating dough), again prefacing his words with “when you arrive in the land to which I am bringing you”, since the halachot of separating challah only apply on a Torah level in Eretz Yisrael³.

Why does Hashem start teaching those halachot pertaining to the land at this point? Bnei Yisrael are nowhere near entering the Land – they were just told that they would need to wander in the desert for 40 years! Some commentators have suggested that Hashem was not just teaching Bnei Yisrael these laws,

¹ Sifrei, quoted by Rashi to Devarim 1:23.

² Devarim 14:39.

³ On a Rabbinical level the laws of separating challah also apply outside the land of Israel.

but he was also indirectly reassuring them that the people would ultimately arrive in the land. By introducing them to these land-based halachot, Hashem was redirecting Bnei Yisrael's vision towards a hopeful future.

When one feels hopeless or despair there is a risk that they will give up and stop making an effort. If one doesn't believe in themselves or have hope for the future, they can become 'learned helpless' and stop growing and improving. They may also give up even the positive actions that they have adopted.

The Torah then tells us the story of the wood gatherer who desecrated Shabbat in public and was punished with the death penalty. Who was this man? Rabbi Akiva says that he was Tzelophchad⁴. Tosefot explain that the Tzelophchad committed the sin deliberately but he was acting l'shem Shamayim (for the sake of Heaven)⁵. After the debacle of the spies, Bnei Yisrael were at risk of giving up on their observance of the Torah. They were in a hopeless state and they didn't believe that their actions had any relevance. Tzelophchad deliberately desecrated Shabbat after being warned not to. He hoped that his inevitable death penalty would shock Bnei Yisrael into taking responsibility for their actions. Tzelophchad sacrificed his life in order to encourage Bnei Yisrael not to become despondent and give up keeping the mitzvot.

How can we help others who may be feeling helpless or hopeless?

The story is told about Shlomo Hamelech who wanted a ring that would make sad people happy and happy people sad. Eventually, he was given a ring that was engraved with the phrase "Gam Zeh Ya'avov" (this too shall pass). No matter what difficulty we are facing, it is really only temporary. Every difficult situation will eventually pass. Adopting this perspective will help our problems to seem more manageable.

Sometimes people need a powerful wake up call to shift their thinking. Like Tzelophchad's valiant sacrifice. Sometimes they just need a fresh perspective, another way of looking at their problems. When Hashem started teaching Bnei Yisrael about the laws that will apply when they enter the land, this buoyed them, enabling them to believe that all hope was not lost. Often, such a shift can be quite subtle, yet it can have a powerful effect. A seed is planted in their mind – the idea that the situation is only temporary.

Here are some phrases that might be helpful in shifting someone's thinking in this way:

"When this is all over, I'm taking you out for lunch."

"One day we will look back at this and laugh."

"I know someone who was in exactly the same situation as you and now he is 100% okay."

"Look up at the stars" - a reminder of how small we and our problems really are.

It might take some effort to work out what will succeed in buoying another in each case. But helping someone to shift their mindset is one of the biggest gifts we can give them and is a powerful way to fulfil the mitzva of v'ahavta l'raicha kamocho.

Let's try something this week:

1. Think up some more relevant and inspirational phrases that you can use to invigorate others. It can be helpful to think about what you would like others to say to you.
2. Try to look out for others who appear to be demoralised and in need of some help. Try to give them chizuk. If it's appropriate, try to help them see a fresh perspective by using phrases which remind them of a positive future, or the temporary nature of all problems.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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⁴ We will read about Tzelophchad's daughters and their love for the land of Israel in Parshat Matot.

⁵ Baba Batra 119b