

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Chukat (Bamidbar 19:1–22:1)
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Chukat – Stepping back, but not stepping away

This week's Parasha of Chukat occurs towards the end of Bnei Yisrael's sojourn in the Midbar. Bnei Yisrael have spent almost 40 years living in a miraculous fashion. Their menu consisted of manna from Heaven. Their clothes did not wear out, but rather stayed fresh and clean and actually grew with them. The Clouds of Glory protected them from the harsh desert sun and allowed them to live in air-conditioned comfort. The Holy Ark would travel in front of the people, fight their battles, kill snakes and scorpions and flatten mountains to ensure that their journey was safe and comfortable. In short, their physical needs were all provided for them, so they were free to focus on learning Hashem's Torah.

But this was all scheduled to change when the people would enter the Holy Land. Then they would need to start living more in accordance with nature. They would need to farm the land and produce their own food. They would need to make and repair their clothes and utensils. The challenge would become how to continue learning Torah and remain holy while being involved in the mundane day-to-day existence and the challenges of building a nation in their own land.¹

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks discusses the idea that this requirement to change and become self-sufficient in the Land may have been one underlying reason for the spies bringing their negative report about the Land in Parashat Sh'lach. Perhaps the spies appreciated their comforts and life of ease in the desert and they didn't want to risk the challenges of living in the Land in accordance with the laws of nature.² Thus, according to this theory, they weren't really afraid of losing against the inhabitants of the Land. They were rather afraid of winning! They didn't fear failure, they feared success.

However, the spies' view did not accord with Hashem's plan. Hashem wanted Bnei Yisrael to enter the Land and face all of the challenges that this would entail. Our role is not to try to outsmart or second-guess Hashem, especially when He provides us with a clear commandment. Perhaps that was the sin of the spies.

There is no doubt that the change from a miraculous existence in the desert to a more natural existence in Eretz Yisrael would be challenging. Generally, difficult changes require a more gradual approach. The “ripping off the Band-Aid” approach might work well when ripping off a Band-Aid. But it doesn't usually work for major life changes.³ Thus, Hashem in His kindness provided Bnei Yisrael with a gradual preparation for this change to life in Eretz Yisrael. Some of these changes can be seen in our Parasha and we can see a gradual progression to Hashem doing less miracles for Bnei Yisrael. For instance:

- When Miriam passes away, the well stops miraculously providing Bnei Yisrael with water. The supply of water does come back temporarily (after Moshe famously hit the rock). However, after almost 40 years of continuous supply, Bnei Yisrael has to start getting used to the idea that the well will not last forever.
- When Aharon passes away, the Clouds of Glory depart. Again, the clouds do come back temporarily in the merit of Moshe's prayers. However, this teaches Bnei Yisrael to get used to the idea that the clouds will not be there forever.
- Finally, our Parasha contains the infamous and enigmatic incident of Moshe hitting the rock. Hashem informs us that Moshe would therefore pass away before crossing the Jordan River and would not take

¹ Of course, Hashem would continue to perform miracles for Bnei Yisrael after entering the Land (for example, the miraculous defeat of Jericho described in Chapter 6 of sefer Yehoshua. However, the focus of life after entering the Land was to live in a much more natural, and less miraculous manner.

² Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Fear of Freedom: <https://www.aish.com/tp/i/sacks/511373241.html>

³ Of course, there are exceptions, when people are able to successfully turn their life upside-down overnight. But these cases are usually the exception that proves the rule.

Bnei Yisrael into the Land. When Moshe would eventually pass away, the miraculous manna would stop falling.⁴

The time of crossing the Jordan River and entering the Land was approaching. There were many parallels between the crossing of the Jordan and the Exodus from Mitzrayim, for instance:

- Just like Hashem split the Reed Sea and Bnei Yisrael crossed on dry land, similarly Hashem split the Jordan River and Bnei Yisrael crossed on dry land.⁵
- Just like there was a mass circumcision of the males before leaving Mitzrayim⁶, there was a mass circumcision of the males upon entering the Holy Land.⁷
- Just like the covenant that Bnei Yisrael entered into with Hashem at Har Sinai, they entered into another covenant upon entering the Land.⁸

Perhaps through these parallels, Hashem was reminding Bnei Yisrael of the Exodus and the giving of the Torah and Bnei Yisrael's Divine mission. However, now that they were entering the Land, their national mission would need to be performed in a less miraculous fashion and governed more by the laws of nature.

Rav Michael Hattin⁹ describes how this concept is reflected in some powerful imagery when Bnei Yisrael finally cross the Jordan River under the leadership of Yehoshua.

Rav Hattin describes the scene when Bnei Yisrael crossed the Jordan. First, the Ark, carried by the Kohanim¹⁰, entered into the Jordan. As soon as the feet of the Kohanim entered the edge of the water, the water stopped flowing at that point. As more water came from upstream, it miraculously banked up in a column and the people could cross on dry land. The pasukim describe in detail what happened to the Ark. At first, the Ark lead the way – the Kohanim carried it into the middle of the river. The Kohanim then waited there, in the middle of the dry river bed, as the people crossed over. When the last person had crossed to the other side, the Kohanim carried the Ark out of the river. As soon as their feet were safely on the other side, the waters of the Jordan returned to normal.

Rav Hattin points out an interesting change at this critical juncture as Bnei Yisrael enter the land. The holy Ark started off leading the way, in front of the people, just as it did during the 40 years in the desert. However, during the crossing, the people start to overtake the Ark and the Ark ends up behind the people by the time they all crossed over. Rav Hattin suggests that this reflects the idea that the miracles are now taking more of a back-seat role. Hashem wanted Bnei Yisrael to start increasing their hishtadlut and take more responsibility for their physical lives. However, the parallels with Yetziyat Mitzrayim serve to remind Bnei Yisrael that Hashem is still really there behind the scenes. Even though Bnei Yisrael will need to use their own prowess and effort to maintain their physical sustenance, they need not fear failure because Hashem will still be right there with them.

The same message applies to us. Hashem wants us to do hishtadlut and be active in this world. However, even though we have left the desert, He does not, and will not, "desert" us. He is right there with us all of the time, providing for us in a more hidden manner under the veil of nature. The only thing we need to fear is that we don't stop being able to see His hand behind it all.

Let's try something this week:

1. Remember - even though Hashem wants us to be pro-active in gathering our sustenance/parnasah, He is still right there with us always.
2. The more effort that we put in, the more we need to make the effort to remember that we are not really responsible for the outcome.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

⁴ See Rashi to Yehoshua 5:11.

⁵ See Chapter 3 of Yehoshua and in particular 4:23.

⁶ See Rashi to Shmot 12:6.

⁷ Due to the travails of wandering in the midbar, it was considered too dangerous to perform circumcisions on the males that were born during those 40 years (Yehoshua 5:2-8).

⁸ Yehoshua 8:33-35.

⁹ Hattin, Rav Michael, "Joshua: The Challenge of the Promised Land (Studies in Tanakh)" Koren Publishers 2014.

¹⁰ In reality, the Ark miraculously carried itself, however the Kohanim would hold on to the staves as if to give the appearance that they were carrying the Ark.