

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Devarim
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Devarim – Transference

In this week’s Parsha of Devarim, Moshe begins his farewell speech to Bnei Yisrael before his death. This speech (which lasted for about a month!) begins with a summary of the experiences of Beni Yisrael during their time wandering in the desert. Let’s focus in on part of that summary. Moshe describes the sin of the spies and the reaction of Bnei Yisrael to their negative report about the Land:

“And you slandered in your tents and said: “Because of Hashem’s hatred for us did he take us out of the land of Egypt to deliver us into the hand of the Amorite to destroy us.”
(Devarim 1:27)

How could Bnei Yisrael claim that Hashem hated them? What an outlandish claim to make! Hashem had just saved them from the Egyptians, sent ten devastating plagues, rescued Bnei Yisrael and then split the sea for them to allow them to escape. He then drowned the entire Egyptian army before their eyes. Hashem then gave Beni Yisrael the Torah, his most precious gift. And now Hashem was about to lead Bnei Yisrael into the Holy Land. How could Bnei Yisrael even suggest that Hashem hated them?

Rashi explains¹ their reaction and his explanation contains within it a deep psychological insight. People tend to transfer their negative feelings to others. For instance, if person A is feeling hatred towards person B, he will justify his feelings by considering that person B hates him. This is represented in a modern psychological principle known as transference.

Bnei Yisrael were feeling negative towards Hashem. Perhaps they were feeling burdened by the mitzvot. Perhaps they were scared of change and they did not know what to expect when they would enter the land. Certainly, their emunah in Hashem was not complete and they were not fully confident of their future safety. Their insecurity led them to feel negatively towards Hashem – so they justified subconsciously these unreasonable thoughts by convincing themselves that Hashem was harbouring negative thoughts about them!

But why were Bnei Yisrael angry at Hashem in the first place? Why did they seek to transfer their anger onto Hashem instead? Let’s look at the rest of Rashi’s commentary on this pasuk to find out.

Rashi explains that Bnei Yisrael were upset at Hashem for taking them out of a country that was well-irrigated and sending them to a land which was reliant on unpredictable rainfall. He explains the reasons for Bnei Yisrael’s attitude with the help of an analogy. A king had two fields and he had two sons. One field was irrigated and thus had a secure water supply. The other field relied on rain to receive its water and thus its water supply was more tenuous. The king gave the irrigated field to his favourite son and the other field to his less-favoured son. Bnei Yisrael were complaining that Egypt had a reliable source of water – the Nile. The land of Israel, on the other

¹ Based on Sifrei 24.

hand, relied on rain. They were upset at Hashem for taking them from a land with a reliable water supply and sending them to a land that was prone to droughts. In the eyes of Bnei Yisrael this was clear proof that Hashem hated them!

Yet in actual fact Bnei Yisrael got it all wrong. The fact that Eretz Yisrael was dependent on rainfall was actually a blessing from Hashem. As we discussed in a previous edition of Darchai Noam², In Parshat Breishit we read about the punishment of the snake in Gan Eden. The Torah records the snake's punishment as follows:

“And Hashem, G-d said to the snake, "Because you have done this, you will be cursed... you shall walk on your belly, and you shall eat dust all the days of your life.”
(Breishit 3:14)

Why does eating dust represent a curse? Unlike the diet of other animals, dust is readily available and in plentiful supply. The Kotzker Rebbe explains that embedded in this seeming advantage is actually a great disadvantage. Since the snake has a regular and plentiful food supply, it is not forced by circumstance to look upwards to Hashem. The snake's punishment is that Hashem is not interested in having a relationship with it. And that is the greatest curse of all.

Like the snake, the Egyptians are not forced by circumstance to regularly turn to the heavens to pray for water. In contrast however, by sending Bnei Yisrael to a land where they would be regularly encouraged to turn to Hashem and pray for rain, they were being gifted with the greatest pleasure – a bond with Hashem. Since Hashem cares for us, He wants to encourage this bond. Hashem desires a relationship with his nation. And that is the greatest blessing of all.

Rav Zev Leff tells the story of a young man who was depressed. Why? His father was a very wealthy business man who was always busy with his business interests. He gave his son a credit card without a limit and told him to use it for whatever he wanted. Many people might think that this is a good problem to have! They would gladly change places with this young man. However, the young man was depressed because he did not have a relationship with his father. In effect, the father was saying to his son “I am too busy to spend any time with you. You now have whatever you could possibly need or want. Please don't disturb me again.” He missed having a loving relationship with his father and that was worth much more than all of the material goods that he could purchase with the credit card.

Similarly, Hashem loves Bnei Yisrael. Therefore, He specifically wants us to turn to Him in prayer frequently, thereby developing our relationship with Him.

Let's try something this week:

1. Remember that people naturally transfer their negative feelings onto others. Try to be aware of this tendency when you are interpreting the actions of others.
2. When you are lacking something in life, remember that Hashem wants you to turn to Him with your tefillot and He wants you to develop a relationship with you.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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² See Darchai Noam for Parashat Ekev 5777 (2017)