

DARCHAI NOAM

Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם

(Mishlei 3:17)

Nitzavim-Vayelech, September 2014

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Nitzavim-Vayelech – the importance of unity

This week's double Parsha, Nitzavim-Vayelech, starts as follows: *"You are standing here today, all of you, before Hashem your G-d"* (Devarim 29:9)

Rashi asks why Parshat Nitzavim comes straight after Parshat Ki Tavo, with the dreadful tochacha, the list of 98 curses that we read last week. He explains as follows¹:

"Because when Israel heard these 98 curses [which were listed in Parshat Ki Tavo]...their faces turned pale and they said "who can endure all of these?" Moshe then began to appease them as follows: "You are standing here today..."

The Midrash Tanchuma explains that the mere fact that Bnei Yisrael were still standing, even though they deserved to be wiped out on a number of occasions, reassures them that they will survive. The Darchai Mussar explains why Bnei Yisrael were still standing despite the curses. The answer lies in the first pasuk of our Parsha which we quoted above: *"You are standing here today, all of you"*. The fact that all of Bnei Yisrael are standing together as a single, united people provides sufficient merit to protect Bnei Yisrael from the worst curses.²

This teaches us the importance of achdut (unity). The Jewish nation as a whole has a special merit, and we can tap into that by attaching ourselves to the community.

In Parshat Yitro, we discussed the Midrash in Vayikra Raba which compares the generation of King David with the generation of King Achav (the seventh king of the northern kingdom of Israel). In the time of King David, all of the people were righteous and learned in Torah, yet they suffered heavy casualties when they went to war. In contrast, the generation of King Achav was idolatrous. However they suffered very few casualties when they went out to war. The Midrash explains that the people in King Achav's kingdom behaved respectfully towards each other and they thus merited a special protection from Hashem.

It is well known that the Jewish people in Israel have witnessed numerous open miracles in the last few months. Many Rabbanim have noted that these miracles coincided with a time of unbelievable unity amongst Klal Yisrael all around the world. The 18 days when Gilad, Eyal and Naftali were missing stimulated a level of unity that has not been witnessed for a long time. It is no coincidence that our supernatural protection occurred at the same time. We need to hang on to this unity. As the memory of the 3 murdered boys and the war in Gaza starts to fade there is a real risk that this special bond of unity will start to weaken. We must not let that happen.

Achdut is particularly important in this auspicious time leading up to Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. Attaching ourselves to the community increases our chance of a favourable judgement.

The prophet Elisha used to visit the town of Shunam regularly³. One of the residents, known only as the Shunamite woman, suggested to her husband that they build a special room for the

¹ Rashi to Devarim 29:12.

² This idea came from The Short Vort, by Rabbi Moshe Kormornick.

³ Melachim II (4:8-14).

prophet so that they could host him whenever he visited the town. Elisha was very grateful. He offered to intercede on the woman's behalf for anything that she needed. The Shunamite woman initially declined the offer, saying "I sit in the midst of my people". The Zohar explains that this story took place on Rosh Hashana. The Shunamite woman didn't want to stand out for personal scrutiny at this auspicious time. She preferred to attach herself to the community and blend in.⁴ Similarly Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman, the Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Branovitch wanted to keep a low profile during the time of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. He avoided being called up to the Torah during this time so as to avoid drawing undue attention to himself.⁵ The Shunamite woman and Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman both understood that the community has a special merit and that it is better to attach ourselves to the communal merit than to rely on our own merits.

We hear a lot about the problems of assimilation and intermarriage amongst the Jewish people and a lot of work is done to stem the tide of this phenomenon. But we need to understand that this important work is not to save the Jewish nation. The Jewish nation is safe. Hashem himself has promised us that as a people we will last forever. However that promise does not extend to each of us individually. Each of us can choose whether or not we remain connected to the Jewish people. During Operation Protective Edge there were a lot of banners placed around Israel to increase the morale of the population. One such banner had the catchphrase: "The Eternal Nation will not fear". The Jewish people is an eternal nation. We each need to attach ourselves to the eternal nation in order to survive individually.

How do we attach ourselves to the community?

We need to actively avoid divisiveness and baseless hatred. Let's think about where divisiveness amongst the Jewish people comes from. People who are different from us often make us feel uncomfortable. If we look closely, we will see that what drives us apart is usually just minhag at best – the style of davening, the clothes we wear, the way we talk. But the mitzvah of v'ahavta l'reicha kamocho, loving our fellow like ourselves, is not just a minhag, it is a mitzvah mid'oraita, one of the 613 Torah level mitzvot. Hashem wants us to love each other and respect each other. This is much more important than which particular stream of Judaism we happen to belong to.

We need to have achdut. We need to feel united with others in our heart, even with those people that make us feel a bit uncomfortable. We Have to remember that one of the Hebrew words for community is Tzibbur, which stands for Tzadik, Beinoni and Rasha. A community consists of righteous people, wicked people and those in the middle. All of us come together to form a community. On Yom Kippur we specifically invite the wicked to join us in our communal prayer.

Finally, we can actively join with the community and look for ways to help others out. Whether it is helping people in need, volunteering for our shule or other acts of communal chesed.

Let's try something this week, the week before Rosh Hashana:

1. Actively remember the message of Nitzavim. If we all stand together, united, we have a special merit that can pull us all individually through this time of judgement.
2. Try to attach ourselves to our community. Think about what we can do to strengthen our community and help each other.

The next Darchai Noam will B"H be issued after Sukkot, in time for Parashat Noach.

Shabbat Shalom and Shana Tova U'metuka,

Rabbi Ledder

⁴ Elisha did daven for the woman and she was blessed with a son, Yonah the prophet.

⁵ Heard from Rav Moshe Donnebaum.

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 parsha 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'reiacha kamocho' – loving one's fellow as oneself.

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