

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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

Miketz – Why did they get drunk?

In this week's Parsha of Miketz, we read about the interactions between Yosef and his brothers. Yosef recognised his brothers, but they had no idea who Yosef was – they assumed that he was the crazy second-in-command of Egypt. After Yosef manipulated his brothers to return to Mitzrayim with Binyamin, the 12 brothers were finally together in one place, for the first time in many years. Yosef invited the brothers to join him at a meal.

He [Yosef] had portions that had been set before him served to them, and Binyamin's portion was five times as much as the portion of any of them. They drank and became intoxicated with him. (Breishit 43:34)

Rashi quotes the Midrash¹ which states that this was the first time that Yosef and his brothers had drunk wine since the sale of Yosef.² The brothers were in a very dangerous situation – they were in a foreign land and were subject to the whims of the very powerful, but apparently erratic and unstable leader. One might think that it was irresponsible to become drunk in such a situation! The Ktav Sofer³ suggests that the fact they got drunk is actually proof that they had not drunk any wine for so long. Their bodies were not used to alcohol and therefore had a low tolerance level. However, there is a glaring issue with this Midrash. Something just doesn't make sense. Can you work out what it is? Stop reading and try to think about it. I'll wait for you at the next paragraph.

Welcome back. Did you work out the problem? I heard this from Rabbi Aryeh Leibowitz and I kicked myself for not thinking of it. He explained as follows. We can understand why Yosef drank wine. He was celebrating the fact that he was finally reunited with all of his brothers (albeit under unusual circumstances). But why did the brothers drink wine?!? They had no idea that they had been reunited with Yosef. They just thought that they were eating dinner with an Egyptian leader!

There are a number of answers suggested by the commentators.

1. When the second-in-command of the world superpower gives you a cup of wine and tells you to drink, you don't ask questions. You just drink. Your life might depend on it. According to this view the brothers were forced to drink wine due to respect for the monarchy.⁴
2. The Maharal⁵ suggests that this was a clever tactic by the brothers. Yosef had repeatedly accused the brothers of being spies who had come to spy out the land of Egypt. They suspected that Yosef might try to get them drunk so that they would come to reveal the truth of their spying activities. The brothers took advantage of this opportunity to become intoxicated so that they could prove to Yosef that they really had nothing to hide.

¹ Breishit Rabba 92:5 and see also the Gemara, Shabbat 139a.

² The Gemara (Shabbat 139a) actually brings two opinions – according to the first opinion, the brothers did not drink any wine at all until that time. According to the second opinion they did drink wine, but not until the point of intoxication.

³ Lived from 1815–1871, one of the leading rabbis of Hungarian Jewry in the second half of the nineteenth century and Rosh Yeshiva of the Pressburg Yeshiva, the son of the Chatam Sofer.

⁴ Maharsha and the Rif.

⁵ This appears in Gur Aryeh, the Maharal's commentary on Rashi's commentary to the Torah.

3. Perhaps we can also suggest that even though the brothers did not know that they were actually sharing a meal with their long-lost brother Yosef, they nevertheless intuitively felt that it was now an appropriate time to drink wine. This can be compared to someone who is sitting shiva for a deceased relative. The shiva experience can be an emotional rollercoaster. At times the mourner feels sad, and at times nostalgic, and at times comforted. Sometimes they feel close to the deceased and sometimes they feel far away. Why is this? Our tradition teaches us that the time of the shiva is a time of transition for the neshama of the deceased.⁶ During that week, the neshama is travelling back and forth to the cemetery and the shiva house. The mourners may not be aware of this on a conscious level, but they somehow sense when the neshama is close and when it is far away. They feel the difference and it affects them emotionally on a spiritual level. Maybe the same thing happened in the case of Yosef's brothers. They were all holy, spiritual people and perhaps on some level they could intuit that there was cause for celebration.
4. Rabbi Lebowitz provides another possible answer that was suggested to him by his chavruta. Have another look at the pasuk that we quoted above. It starts off by saying that Yosef gave Binyamin extra food – five times more than he gave to the other brothers. Like Yosef, Binyamin was also the son of Rachel, Yaakov's favourite wife. After Yosef's disappearance, Binyamin took Yosef's place as Yaakov's special son. It was only natural that the jealousy that the other brothers had felt towards Yosef would be transferred to Binyamin instead. In fact, some commentators explain that all of Yosef's ploys were designed to test the brothers to see if they had truly done teshuva and mended their ways. At the end of the Parasha, when the 'stolen' wine goblet appears in Binyamin's sack, the brothers had a golden opportunity to get rid of Binyamin just like they got rid of Yosef! Yosef wanted to know whether they would let that happen.⁷ At the meal, Yosef was already lavishing extra attention on Binyamin. However, though it would have been natural and expected, the brothers did not feel any jealousy towards Binyamin whatsoever. Therefore, it seems that they had succeeded in overcoming this middah (character trait) of jealousy. Rav Yisroel Salanter⁸ famously taught that changing one middah is harder than learning the entire Gemara! Consider how much of a celebration we have when we complete learning the entire Shas in the Daf Yomi cycle! Hundreds of thousands of people gather together to celebrate. The brothers were thus drinking to celebrate the fact that they had achieved a wonderful goal.

This final explanation reminds us about the importance of working on our middot. We all have middot that need to be worked on and this work is not easy. It can take a lifetime. We need to spend some serious quiet time thinking about what middot we need to work on and then start putting in that work. We should keep in mind the fact that changing a middah is extremely difficult and not expect instant results. If we keep this in mind, then when we face the inevitable setbacks, we will not become disheartened. We can just keep trying to work at it. And when we have successes, we can treat ourselves to a l'chaim!

Let's try something this week:

1. Remember that changing a middah is hard work - harder than learning all of Shas!
2. Spend some time choosing a middah that you feel needs to be improved and then put in place a plan to improve it.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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⁶ See "Soul Searching" by Yaakov Astor, Feldheim 2003, in particular pages 57-65.

⁷ See Darchai Noam for Miketz 5776 (2016) where we discussed this idea in more depth.

⁸ 1809 - 1883, known as the father of the Musar movement.