

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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

Parashat Shmot – The fear of Heaven

In this week's Parasha of Shmot, Moshe has his famous encounter with Hashem at the burning bush. Moshe would be given the task of representing Hashem and leading Bnei Yisrael out of Mitzrayim. But Moshe, in his humility, was at first reluctant to take on the job. One of his concerns was that Bnei Yisrael would not believe that he was their Divinely appointed leader. Hashem provided Moshe with a number of miraculous signs that Moshe could use to prove to Bnei Yisrael that he was the legitimate saviour. One of those signs was changing Moshe's staff into a snake. Let's examine this sign.

Moshe complained that Bnei Yisrael will not believe him when he claims that Hashem appeared to him. So Hashem responded as follows:

(2) And Hashem said to him, "What is this in your hand?" And he said, "A staff".

(3) And He said, "Throw it to the ground". And he threw it to the ground and it became a snake and Moshe fled from before it.

(4) And Hashem said to Moshe, "Stretch forth your hand and grab its tail". So Moshe stretched forth his hand and grabbed it and it became a staff in his hand. (Shmot 4:2-4)

In his commentary on pasuk 3, Rashi explains the symbolism of the snake. Hashem was hinting to Moshe that he had spoken negatively of Israel when he said that they will not believe him. He had thus adopted the art of the snake from Gan Eden.¹

When the staff turned into a snake, Moshe was frightened and fled from it. The Ramban explains that Moshe feared that he would be punished, and the snake would bite him. It is human instinct to avoid danger and run away, even though Moshe knew that if it was indeed Hashem's desire to punish him, he could not escape Hashem's wrath.

But then Hashem told Moshe to grab the snake's tail. And immediately Moshe did so. We see a remarkable transformation from pasuk 3 to pasuk 4. Moshe is able to overcome his fear and follow Hashem's instruction.

A few weeks ago, I was called out of the house by a very nervous neighbour. There was a real live snake in the path between our houses. Fortunately, my neighbour managed to trap the snake's head with a rock, but it was very much alive and thrashing around. I grabbed a heavy metal rake and was able to take care of it, but I didn't stop hitting it the snake until I was absolutely sure that it was dead. This was only a small baby snake, but I didn't know whether the snake was poisonous. There was no way that I would grab hold of the tail if someone had asked me to! I left it to my neighbour to dispose of the body while I went back home to wait for my heart rate to return to normal.

How was Moshe able to overcome his fear of the snake and grab its tail?

There are six constant mitzvot that we are all obligated to keep at all times. One of those mitzvot is to the obligation to fear Hashem.² The source of this mitzva is the pasuk "Hashem, your G-d, you shall fear".³ This mitzva is known as Yirat Hashem or more commonly Yirat Shamayim (the fear of Heaven). If one can truly internalise this fear of Hashem, then one will not fear anything or anyone else. This is obviously a very high level to be on, but we are all obligated to try our best.

¹ This comment comes from the Midrash (Shmot Rabba 3:12). The Midrash notes that the snake spoke negatively about Hashem in Breishit 3:5.

² The other constant mitzvot are: having faith in Hashem; not to believe in other gods; believing that Hashem is One; loving Hashem; and not straying after your heart and eyes. See Artscroll's "The 6 Constant Mitzvot" based on shiurim by Rabbi Yitzchak Berkowitz for more information.

³ Devarim 10:20.

What does it mean to fear Hashem?⁴ The Sefer HaChinuch⁵ writes that the fear of Hashem should be on our face constantly, so that we do not sin. That is to say, we must fear His punishment and we should not free our heart from fearing Him the entire day. The Rambam understands "Yirat Hashem" in terms of awe, rather than fear.⁶ The Ran⁷ explains that Yirat Shamayim is not an irrational or paralyzing fear of something terrible that will happen if we sin. Rather, it is a realization that the Torah is real and that there are consequences if we sin (unless we do teshuva).

It is interesting that this fear of *Hashem* is often called Fear of *Shamayim*. The word 'Shamayim' is being used as an indirect reference to Hashem Himself. But the Meshech Chochmah provides a brilliant allusion to this term from the very beginning of sefer Breishit. The pasuk⁸ describes the creation of the division between the Heavens and the Earth on the second day of creation.⁹ "And G-d said, "Let there be an expanse in the midst of the water and let it be a separation between water and water". Rashi explains¹⁰ that even though the Heavens were already created on the first day, they were still moist. They solidified on the second day from the rebuke of Hashem when he said, "Let there be an expanse" (יהי רקיע). The pillars of the heavens trembled the entire first day, and on the second day "They were astonished by his rebuke"¹¹ like a person who stands in astonishment because of the rebuke of one who frightens him. Hashem roared at the heavens, and they froze in fright. And they have remained frozen ever since, for thousands of years! According to this understanding, when we say "Yirat Shamayim" or "fear of Heaven" we don't mean that we are fearing Heaven. Rather, we are emulating the fear of Hashem that the Heavens had, and still have. Thus, we can learn from the Heavens' response, how we should fear Hashem.

Let's look at some famous incidents from the greats of the past who were able to internalise this message.

Rav Chaim of Volozhin, in The Nefesh HaChaim cites the Gemara¹² that one who internalises the pasuk 'Ein Od Milvado' (There is nothing else beside Hashem) will be protected from harm. The Brisker Rav, Rav Yitzchak Zev Soloveitchik was a descendant of Rav Chaim of Volozhin. When the Germans occupied Poland at the beginning of WWII, the Brisker Rav fled from Warsaw to Vilna. The roads were filled with German troops but he focused on this pasuk and was able to pass through untouched. He later told that, just once, he was distracted. Immediately an armed Nazi guard approached him. But he was able to refocus his thoughts and the Nazi moved on.

In Russia in the 1920s, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn was interrogated for his 'illegal activities' – creating underground Jewish institutions like yeshivot and mikvahs. At one point the interrogator pointed a gun at the Rebbe and said "This toy has a way of making people cooperate". Calmly, the Rebbe replied: "That toy is persuasive to one who has many gods and only one world. I have One G-d and two worlds.

Now we can understand how Moshe was able to grab the tail of the snake. Hashem Himself told Moshe to do it. Moshe had true Yirat Shamayim, and he was thus able to overcome his instinctive response and the powerful urge to run away. If you truly fear Hashem you don't fear anything else.

How are we holding in our fear of Hashem? We can gauge this by noticing to what degree we fear other people who are in a position of power. When meeting with someone in a position of real power (your boss, the school principal, a police officer, a judge, the decision maker at the tax department) how do you feel? Are you conscious of Hashem at all? Is your mouth dry? Is your heart rate elevated? You can't fake those symptoms. Being aware of our response will provide us with an insight as to how well we can't are doing in emulating the "Fear of Heaven".

Let's try something this week:

1. The next time you are speaking to someone in a position of power, try to be aware of your bodily response. To what degree do you fear the person and to what degree do you fear Hashem (if at all)?
2. Before entering a nerve-wracking situation, try to bring Hashem into the picture. For instance, you could focus on the pasuk "Ein Od Milvado".

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁴ This paragraph is based on the Artscroll's "The 6 Constant Mitzvot" pages 189-195.

⁵ Mitzva 432.

⁶ Hilchot Yesodai HaTorah 2:2.

⁷ Drashah 10.

⁸ Breishit 1:6.

⁹ This is a very imprecise translation of the term "הרקיע".

¹⁰ Based on the Midrash, Breishit Rabbah 12:10.

¹¹ Iyov 26:11.

¹² Chullin Daf 7b.