

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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

Ekev – Water, water, everywhere; Nor any drop to drink.¹

In times past, Israel, and the entire Jewish world, was very focused on the level of the Kinneret, the major supply of water for the country. Scientists explained that if the water level in the Kinneret were to drop too low, irreversible salt infiltration would flood the lake and ruin it forever.² Currently, the water in the Kinneret is low. Yet, strangely enough over the last few years, people in Israel do not seem too troubled by the level of the Kinneret. This is despite the fact that the entire Middle East is suffering a serious water crisis. For example, almost the entire Syrian farming industry has collapsed due to a lack of water. Why isn't Israel concerned?

The answer to this question is a modern-day miracle – desalination plants. Israeli scientists have developed a method to convert sea water into fresh drinking water. This new technology is by far much cheaper, safer and more efficient than the technology used in any other country in the world. Remarkably, Israel now has more fresh water than it needs! Some have suggested that Israel can barter its water supply with its Arab neighbours for peace.³ Israel, known as the start-up nation, has successfully used technology to solve a very serious problem. We are certainly living in exciting times!

However, there is another perspective.

In this week's Parasha, Moshe compares the land of Israel to the land of Egypt:

*“For the Land to which you are coming to possess is not like the land of Egypt from which you came, where you would plant your seed and **which you watered on foot like a vegetable garden**. But the Land to which you pass to possess is a Land of mountains and valleys; **it drinks water from the rain of Heaven**. A Land that Hashem your G-d looks after, the eyes of Hashem your G-d are always upon it, from the beginning of the year until the end of the year.”*
(Devarim 11:10-12)

Moshe pointed out a simple but fundamental difference in the agricultural system of Egypt and Israel. Egypt receives very little rainfall. Their main source of water was (and still is) the Nile River. Each year the Nile overflowed its banks. The ancient Egyptians built a system of channels and dams to capture this overflow in order to irrigate their crops. Their water supply was plentiful and reliable. In contrast, the Land of Israel relied on rainfall for irrigating its crops. This meant that farmers were constantly reliant on Hashem to take care of watering the crops.⁴ Since rainfall is not very regular in Israel, farmers would spend a lot of time looking up at the sky and beseeching Hashem for rain. There are many stories in the Gemara of drought in the Land of Israel and the Rabbis having to declare days of fasting and extra prayers in the hope that Hashem would send the rain.⁵

¹ The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, by Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

² Many of the facts presented in this article come from: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/israel-proves-the-desalination-era-is-here/>

³ Others are less optimistic (more realistic?) and believe that only the Mashiach can bring peace to this part of the world!

⁴ See Rashi to Devarim 11:10.

⁵ See for example the discussion in Chapters 2 and 3 of the Gemara, masechet Ta'anit.

The reliable supply of water enjoyed by Egypt seems to be a desirable attribute of that land. So why is Moshe praising Eretz Yisrael for its unpredictable rain?

Perhaps one answer can be traced back to Parshat Breishit and 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 more than all the cattle and more than all the beasts of the field; 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 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 discourages it from having a relationship with Him. 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, Bnei Yisrael in Eretz Yisrael needed to constantly turn to Hashem and beg Him for rain. This act of turning to Hashem is itself the greatest gift and the greatest pleasure as it bonds us to 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!

Applying this idea to the desalination plants, we can see that even though they are a blessing, they may also contain a hidden danger. By guaranteeing ourselves a plentiful supply of water, we risk losing an opportunity to strengthen our relationship with Hashem. We risk falling into the trap that Moshe predicted earlier in this week's Parasha:

"And you will say in your heart: "My strength and the might of my hand have made all this wealth for me". (Devarim 8:17).

So what now? How can we benefit from the plentiful supply of drinking water that the desalination plants provide, while still managing to turn to Hashem and develop our relationship with Him? Moshe himself provides the answer in the very next pasuk:

"Then you shall remember Hashem your G-d, that it was He who gave you your strength to make wealth..." (Devarim 8:18).

We must constantly try to remember. Who gave us the intelligence to invent the desalination technology? Who gave us the ideas? Who gave us the abilities? It was not the "strength and the might of our hands". It was all from Hashem. Just as the rain is a blessing from Hashem, so too every drop of water that we obtain via the miraculous desalination plants is a constant blessing from Hashem. We must actively remind ourselves to feel unbounded gratitude to Hashem for providing us with this modern-day miracle. Like all of the myriad and essential facets of life that we often take for granted, water is a gift from Hashem – whether it falls from the sky as precipitation or is processed from sea water through modern technology.

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to be more aware of all the miracles that Hashem gives us each day. This may be more challenging when those miracles appear to come through human hands and hishtadlut instead of occurring through nature.
2. Try to notice the trap of thinking "my strength and the might of my hands have made all this wealth for me".