

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat B'shalach
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

B'shalach – Why did Moshe sit on a stone?

At the end of this week's Parasha, we read about the war with Amalek. Beni Yisrael's faith was weaker due to issues with the water supply, and that weakness provided an opening for Amalek to attack.¹ Moshe appointed Yehoshua to lead the battle against Amalek.

While Yehoshua was battling the enemy, Moshe, Aaron and Hur ascended to the top of the hill overlooking the battlefield. Moshe stood on top of the hill with the 'staff of G-d' in his hand. The pasuk tells us that when Moshe raised his hands, Bnei Yisrael would prevail and when he laid down his hands, Amalek would prevail.

Rashi quotes the Gemara, which asks the obvious question – did Moshe's hands make them victorious in battle? Rather, the raised hands encouraged Bnei Yisrael to look up and subjugate their hearts to their Father in Heaven. Then they would prevail. And if not, they would fall.²

However, it is hard work to keep your hands up in the air for a long time. (As an aside, doing exercises that involve raising your hands above your head is a great way to keep up your heart rate and improve cardiovascular fitness³). Moshe's hands inevitably started to tire. But the fate of the battle was at stake, so something needed to be done urgently, to keep his hands raised.

Now Moshe's hands were heavy; so they took a stone and placed it under him, and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur supported his hands, one from this side and one from that side; so he was with his hands in faith until sunset.

Why did Moshe sit on a stone? Does it really matter what he sat on? Yet, the Torah goes out of its way to tell us that Moshe was sitting on a *stone*. Rashi quotes an important lesson from the Gemara in Taanit (the tractate of Gemara that deals with public fast days and the response to national difficulties). The Gemara⁴ states that when the community is distressed, a person should share in that distress together with the community. The Gemara refers to this incident from our Parasha of Moshe sitting on a stone. “But didn't Moshe have a pillow or a cushion to sit upon?”, asks the Gemara. “Why was he forced to sit on a rock? Rather, Moshe thought as follows: Since the Jewish people are immersed in suffering, I too will be with them in suffering, as much as I am able, even though I am not participating in the actual fighting.”

The Rambam codifies this concept in his halachic work, the Mishneh Torah.⁵ He discusses the seriousness of a person who separates himself from the community, even though he has not transgressed any sins. “A person who separates himself from the congregation of Israel and does not fulfill mitzvot together with them, who **does not take part in their hardships**, or join in their fasts, but rather goes on his own individual path as if he is from another nation and not Israel, **does not have a portion in the World to Come**”. Thus, the Rambam writes, even if a person does not transgress any other sin, if he does not join together with the community, he may lose his portion in the World to Come!

I once heard the story of a Rav in America over 80 years ago, who had finally arranged to re-paint his house. He had saved up for ages to afford this 'luxury'. However, before the painter was due to start, news of the horrific crimes in Nazi Germany started to filter through. In light of these developments, the painting of his house seemed far less important. The Rav decided to cancel the painting. He paid the painter in full under the contract, but he

¹ See Shmot 17:7 and Rashi's comment to Shmot 17:8.

² See Gemara Rosh Hashanah 29a.

³ But please check with your doctor before starting a new exercise routine.

⁴ Taanit 11a.

⁵ Hilchot Teshuva 3:11.

told him not to do the job. How could he spend money on painting his house when his brothers and sisters in Europe were suffering?

The following story⁶ occurred in Israel in 1943:

The Ponovezher Rav established an orphanage in Bnei Brak to absorb the many orphaned children who were rescued from the Holocaust. The first group were scheduled to arrive on a Sunday, but they lacked linens or pillows for the children to sleep on, due to the harsh financial conditions in Israel at the time. On Shabbat afternoon, the Rav addressed the community in the largest shul in town. He discussed the Gemara (Kiddushin 20a) that teaches that a person who acquires a Jewish servant, in a sense acquires a master for himself. This is due to the Torah's requirement to equate the servant's standard of living to his owner's level of comfort. If the master only has one pillow he would violate the requirement to give his slave equal treatment, and he therefore has no choice but to give his only pillow to his servant. The Rav explained that the requirement to give the pillow to the servant is actually based on the Torah's concern for the master's well-being. If the master kept the pillow for himself, his conscience would bother him so much that he wouldn't be able to enjoy the pillow and have a good night's rest. Therefore, to allow the master to sleep well, the Torah requires him to give the pillow to his servant. The Rav then told the community about the desperate situation with the orphans. He told them that for their own well-being they should donate the only pillows and linens in their possession. Of course, they did so, straight after Shabbat.

The relevance to our current situation is obvious. There are still hostages being kept underground under unimaginable conditions. For over 100 days! Our brave soldiers are putting their lives on the line in an effort to rid the world of evil. Around a quarter of a million Israeli citizens from the north and the south of the country are displaced, unable to live in their homes, go to work, or send their kids to kindergarten or school.

Someone told me that he has decided to cut out all sweeteners from his tea and coffee while the situation remains so intolerable. He started this practice soon after October 7. The only time that he adds sugar to his hot drinks is on Shabbat, because Shabbat is not a time for mourning or distress⁷. It is his token sacrifice to identify with those who are suffering so greatly.⁸

One might argue that taking on a personal sacrifice is not helpful to the overall situation. How does it help others in crisis if I limit my treats? Surely there will just be more suffering in the world! However, we can use this small sacrifice to help stir us into action. Each time my friend drinks a cup of bitter tea or coffee, he is reminded to pray with more kavana, to say another chapter of Tehillim, and of course to continue giving tzedakah and whatever other practical actions he is able to do in order to help the situation and alleviate the suffering of others. And the very act of self-denial or the sake of unifying and empathising with the suffering of our fellow Jews is precious to Hashem. It shows Him that we are brothers and sisters who share each other's pain.

The Gemara in Taanit that we quoted above encourages us to join in the suffering and distress of the community. But the Gemara ends on a more positive note. It adds that anyone who is distressed together with the community will merit seeing the consolation of the community. B'ezrat Hashem may that time arrive speedily.

Let's try something this week:

1. The war situation in Israel, and the growing antisemitism around the world, is dragging on. We need to continually strengthen ourselves and keep in the forefront of our minds the suffering of our brothers and sisters. Remember we are all children of the same Father, who wants us to be compassionate and caring of each other.
2. Keep up the important work, joining with the community, donating, fighting the public image battle, volunteering – each in their own way.
3. Try not to get so caught up in your own daily struggle that you forget about the plight of others.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁶ Adapted from "Parsha Potpourri", by Rabbi Ozer Alport: <https://aish.com/150341185/>

⁷ Of course, one needs to know how to make a hot drink on Shabbat in a halachically permissible manner. Please ask your Rabbi if you are not sure.

⁸ If this is too much to take on, perhaps you can decide to limit yourself to one spoon of sugar per cup. Or five spoons. (Each person at their own level.)