

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?

Shmot – What exactly did Moshe do wrong?

In this week's Parasha of Shmot, Moshe is Divinely appointed as the leader of Bnei Yisrael and tasked with leading them out from the slavery of Mitzrayim.¹

However, Moshe's first foray into international diplomacy is not as effective as he was probably hoping for. Moshe and Aaron ask Pharaoh for a three-day vacation, but it is denied. Actually, Pharaoh concludes that the people must have too much time on their hands to think of such notions. He decides to multiply their work quota. Now Bnei Yisrael need to forage for the straw they need to make the bricks. If their situation was intolerable beforehand, it now appears utterly hopeless. And the people tell Moshe and Aaron of their displeasure:

They said to them, “May Hashem look upon you and judge you, for you have made our very scent abhorrent in the eyes of Pharaoh and in the eyes of his servants, to place a sword in their hands to kill us!” (Shmot 5:21)

Since Hashem had told Moshe to approach Pharaoh and ask for the three-day release, Moshe goes back to Hashem to complain about the seemingly disastrous results:

“Lord, why have you done evil to this people? Why did you send me? From the time I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has done evil to this people, but You have not saved Your people.” (Shmot 5:22)

Hashem was not happy with Moshe's complaint. Hashem compares Moshe unfavourably with the Avot. Rashi² explains that the Avot never questioned Hashem's ways of running the world. And even when the Avot experienced extremely difficult challenges they did not complain. Hashem had promised the entire Land of Canaan to each of Avraham, Yitzhak and Yaakov but they did not live to see that promise fulfilled. Avraham had to fork out a fortune for a burial spot for Sarah. Yitzhak had to struggle with the Plishtim to find a supply of water. Yaakov had to pay a fortune to buy some land near Shechem. But they did not complain. Hashem promised Avraham that his descendants will come through Yitzhak, but then he instructed Avraham to offer up Yitzhak as a korban. Avraham rushed to fulfil Hashem's command and did not question His ways. Yet, at the first sign of trouble, Moshe is complaining to Hashem and questioning His ways. Hashem fondly remembers the Avot and he yearns, so to speak, for them.

But this raises a question. Hashem had made promises to the Avot, and they did not live to see those promises fulfilled. Yes, they were on a high enough level that they did not complain and rather accepted Hashem's ways with pure emunah. But the Avot were individuals. They represented only themselves. Moshe's role was different. He was the leader of Bnei Yisrael. He was not making a personal complaint. He was coming before Hashem on behalf of Hashem's beloved people and complaining on their behalf. Moshe was responsible for the entire nation. Wasn't it admirable for Moshe to bring their complaint to Hashem? Indeed, Moshe argued on behalf of Bnei Yisrael numerous times in the Midbar and Hashem did not object. Why was Hashem displeased with this particular complaint of Moshe?

Rabbi Yissocher Frand³ explains that Moshe erred in his choice of words. He said to Hashem “Why have you treated these people *badly*?” Thus, he referred to Hashem's action as “bad”. That was a mistake. Hashem only does good. Though Moshe was obligated to advocate for Bnei Yisrael (and he did so valiantly many times over the course of his career) he mistakenly called Hashem's actions bad. While advocating for their needs, Moshe should have still acknowledged that all that Hashem does is for the good. At the same time, he could have also begged Hashem for revealed good, that Bnei Yisrael's situation should be better in a way that is obvious to all.

¹ This week's Darchai Noam is inspired by an article from Rav Yissocher Frand: <https://aish.com/567121491/>

² In his commentary to Shmot 6:1.

³ See source in footnote 1.

This opens up a huge philosophical conundrum. We do see a lot of 'evil' in the world. We don't have to look too far. The events of October 7, the innocent civilians who are still held hostages under horrific circumstances, as well as the countless events that have occurred to us over our long history. Many have wondered – where was Hashem during these tragic occurrences?

Though we can't do justice to such a question in one Darchai Noam, we can quote the Ramchal in Derech Hashem who deals with this difficult question with amazing clarity. The Ramchal explains that there must be the possibility for evil to exist in this world in order to ensure that man has free will. What we perceive as 'evil' is in reality a concealment of Hashem.

Hashem is always illuminating his countenance upon anyone who approaches Him. The withholding of good is not from Him at all. Rather, one who does not approach Hashem will lack His illumination. Thus, the impediment is from the recipient, not the One providing the Shefa⁴. One receives of Hashem's illuminations by approaching Him, whereas Hashem is concealed from the one who fails to approach Him.⁵

The Divine Wisdom decreed that the reality of both good and evil should exist in the world... Even though in reality, the cause of all manifestations of good, is the illumination of Hashem's countenance, and the cause of all evil is the withdrawal of Hashem's illumination, nonetheless, with regard to good, Hashem is described as the actual cause. But regarding evil we cannot describe Hashem as the actual cause, because Hashem does not associate His Name with evil. Rather, it is the withdrawal of His illumination and the concealment of His countenance that can be considered the root of evil, because this is its true cause – due to the absence of good.⁶

This is a deep idea. But one take home message relevant to us is that we are obligated to believe that everything that Hashem does is for the best. Even if we don't understand or cannot see the good. In fact, this is a positive obligation that applies to all of us at all times, as ruled in the Shulchan Aruch:⁷ One should always accustom himself to say "Everything Hashem does is for the best".

The story is told of a young man who was struggling with some unanswered questions and deep philosophical conundrums.⁸ He was so troubled by his difficulties that he was ready to throw in the towel and walk away from a life of Torah and Mitzvot. He presented his problems to his Rabbi and asked for advice. The Rabbi referred the man to an obscure Tosefot⁹ in an apparently random masechet of the Gemara. The man raced to the Gemara and eagerly turned to the right page, excited to finally find an answer to the questions that were troubling him. But he was disappointed. He went back to the Rabbi and complained. "Did you check the Tosefot that I suggested?" asked the Rabbi. "Yes I did, but it didn't help me. It had nothing to do with the issues that are troubling me. And not only that, Tosefot asked a really good question and then just left it unanswered!" "And what came next on the Daf?" asked the Rabbi. "Just another Tosefot that dealt with another issue!" "You see", said the Rabbi, "Tosefot asked a really good question, and he could not find an answer. But he didn't give up. He just kept going, asking other questions, and writing more commentary on the Gemara. Just because we have a question that we can't answer doesn't mean that we have to give up. There are some things that we just can't understand. We just have to accept them, simply because Hashem said so".

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to follow the halacha of becoming accustomed to saying regularly "Everything that Hashem does is for the best".
2. When we have a difficult challenge where we cannot see the good, remember that there are often things that we simply cannot understand. Accept that Hashem is in charge and realise that He knows what He is doing.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁴ This is a very difficult word to translate. We could use the word 'bounty' to give an idea of what it means.

⁵ Derech Hashem 1:4:10, taken from the Feldheim elucidated translation (with slight amendments).

⁶ Ibid, 1:5:7-8.

⁷ Orach Chaim 230:5.

⁸ I understand that is a true story. I first shared this story in Parashat Behar Bechukotai 5781. The message is worth repeating.

⁹ The Tosefot commentary appears on the outside margin of the pages of the Gemara.