

# DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

## “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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

### Yitro – Feeling happy for another’s good fortune

At the beginning of this week’s Parasha, we read about Yitro, Moshe’s father-in-law, coming to meet Bnei Yisrael in the Midbar together with Moshe’s wife and two sons. Moshe told Yitro about all that Hashem had done for Bnei Yisrael – rescuing them from slavery and punishing the Mitzrim. Yitro rejoiced at the news.

*“Yitro rejoiced (וַיִּחַד יִתְרוֹ) over all the good that Hashem had done for Yisrael, that He rescued them from the hands of the Mitzrim” (Shmot 18:9)*

Yitro was not Jewish,<sup>1</sup> and he was once an adviser to Pharaoh,<sup>2</sup> yet he was able to feel truly happy for the good fortune of Bnei Yisrael. The word used to describe Yitro’s reaction is ‘Vayichad’ (וַיִּחַד). Some commentators<sup>3</sup> explain that this word alludes to ‘prickles’ meaning that he was so happy at the news that he had goose bumps. His happiness was genuine. You can’t fake goose bumps. Other commentators<sup>4</sup> explain ‘Vayichad’ as relating to prickles of unease. Yitro couldn’t help having an unpleasant feeling when he heard about the downfall of Mitzrayim. According to this view, Yitro still identified somewhat with the Egyptians, and he was sensitive to their pain. Yet, despite this discomfort, the pasuk testifies that Yitro still rejoiced over the Bnei Yisrael’s good fortune.

Let us focus on this admirable middah of Yitro. It is not such a simple matter to feel genuine joy for another’s good fortune. Human nature is that people usually feel jealous of others. We naturally tend to compare ourselves to other people, and when they enjoy success, we feel inferior. It reminds me of an old joke that you have probably heard before, but it has an important message.

*Reuven found a genie who granted him three wishes. But there was a catch – whatever he wished for himself, his competitor Shmuel would get double. Reuven thought very carefully. First he wished for a \$100 million. His wish was granted, but Shmuel was given \$200 million. Reuven then wished for a lavish mansion. Again, his wish was granted, but Shmuel was granted an enormous mansion, double the size of Reuven’s mansion, and it was next door! For Reuven’s third wish he asked to be blinded in one eye...<sup>5</sup>*

No matter what we have, if someone else has something better, we tend to feel dissatisfied. The following is based on a true story that was published in a small Hebrew booklet that focused on improving one’s middot.

*Yehuda had a good job, and he was very happy at work. He earned 7,000 shekels a month and that was enough to cover his monthly expenses.<sup>6</sup> He was absolutely delighted when his boss called him into his office and offered him a 2,000 shekel a month pay rise. He took his wife out to a celebratory dinner. But a few days later he was chatting to Levi, his co-worker and he found out that Levi was given a 4,000 shekel raise. Now Yehuda was discontent. He knew that he was a much better worker than Levi and he had been employed by that company for longer. He deserved the higher salary. Yehuda became more and more depressed and his performance at work declined. Eventually he decided to leave his job and find a better position where he would be more appreciated. He spent a number of months searching for a job and those months were difficult financially. Finally, he managed to find another job... that paid him 7,000 shekels a month.*

What a sad story. Yehuda didn’t realise that Hashem had granted Levi a higher salary because Levi needed it. Perhaps Levi was paying off a large debt. Or perhaps he was about to face high medical bills. Or maybe he gave more of his income to tzedakah.

<sup>1</sup> He converted to Judaism later (see Ramban’s commentary to Shmot 18:12).

<sup>2</sup> Sotah 11a.

<sup>3</sup> Such as the Ohr HaChaim.

<sup>4</sup> Such as Rashi, based on Sanhedrin 94a.

<sup>5</sup> There are other versions of this joke, such as “Reuven wished for one of his kidneys to stop working” or “Reuven wished to be beaten half to death”. But you get the idea.

<sup>6</sup> Obviously this story took place some time ago!

The Gemara in Sotah<sup>7</sup> discusses a wife who was warned not to seclude herself with a particular man, but she does so. The Gemara analyses what is the underlying cause of such behaviour. Is she struggling with inappropriate desires and can't control herself? Maybe she had a difficult childhood? Maybe she doesn't feel appreciated by her husband? But no, the Gemara explains that the cause is quite simple: The sotah simply set her eyes on one unfit for her. And the result is that what she sought was not given to her (i.e., she becomes prohibited to that man forever, even after leaving her husband), and what was in her hand they took from her (i.e., death through drinking the bitter waters, or becoming prohibited to her husband through confessing). Because, the Gemara explains, anyone who sets his eyes on what is not his, what he seeks is not given to him, and what is in his hand they take from him. The case at hand is the Sotah, but the lesson is appropriate for all of us. If we look at what is not meant for us, we don't get what we want and we also risk losing what we have.

How can we overcome this natural tendency to be jealous, and instead reach a level of feeling genuine joy for others? Here is a beautiful idea from Rav Matsiyahu Salomon z"l, who passed away a few weeks ago.<sup>8</sup>

We are taught that Bilaam's level of prophecy was in some respects comparable to Moshe Rabbeinu.<sup>9</sup> Bilaam tried to pronounce terrible curses against Bnei Yisrael, but Hashem changed his words into beautiful blessings. One of Bilaam's most famous prophecies is included in our siddur and we recite it when we enter shul every morning: "How goodly are your tents, O' Yaakov, your dwelling places O' Yisrael".<sup>10</sup>

The Gemara<sup>11</sup> and the Midrash<sup>12</sup> explain the meaning of this pasuk. Bilaam was praising Bnei Yisrael for the fact that their tents were positioned such that their doors did not face each other, meaning that neighbours could not see into each other's tents. This lofty trait of modesty and privacy deserved to be highlighted at the beginning of Bilaam's prophecy.

Rav Matsiyahu Salomon asks some very powerful questions about this Midrash. Why was Bnei Yisrael praised so highly for the fact that the entrances of their tents did not face each other? Isn't this a basic measure of privacy that most people would insist on? Who would want their door open to the public so people could see inside their home! And furthermore, why do we need the powerful prophet Bilaam to reveal this attribute of Bnei Yisrael? Anyone passing through the camp would surely notice this 'town planning regulation' with merely a glance.

Rav Salomon explains<sup>13</sup> that the true underlying motivation behind the positioning of their tents was not just to preserve their own privacy, but rather in order to prevent them from being able to see into their neighbour's homes! Their real intention was to ensure that they focused on their own home, without being distracted by what was happening elsewhere. This was truly an exalted attribute, as it is human nature to generally enjoy prying into the business of others. And this also explains why we needed prophecy to reveal this hidden aspect to Bnei Yisrael's positioning of their tents. This idea is especially appropriate now during the time of 'Shovavim' (the time from Parashat Shmot to Parashat Mishpatim) when the kabbalists teach us that it is appropriate to focus on our level of kedusha, guarding our eyes, being careful with what we see, and other related issues.

If we can focus more on our own family and home, we can live richer lives. By not looking outward at what other people are doing, we won't be introducing unnecessary competition into our lives, and we will be less likely to feel dissatisfied as a result. We will understand that there is a clear distinction between what is relevant for us and our lives and what is only relevant for others. The more we focus on and strengthen our own inner world, the less competitive we will feel. Then, when we hear good news about someone else, we will be more likely to feel genuine joy for their good fortune, just like Yitro.

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to be more mindful when experiencing your own life. Enjoy special times with your family and the comforting feeling of being able to relax and feel safe in your own home. Focus inwards, not outwards and try to curb any tendency to compete with others.
2. Be aware of how often you focus on the lives of others. This is particularly relevant for those who spend too much time on social media, checking the 'status' of their 'friends'. Understand that you are introducing competition into your life unnecessarily and this can only lead to dissatisfaction.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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<sup>7</sup> Daf 9a.

<sup>8</sup> Rav Salomon was the mashgiach ruchani of the Bet Medrash Govoha Yeshiva in Lakewood. I saw this idea in the book "Building Foundations For Life – A guide to the challenge of kedushah in our generation" by Rabbi Chaim Dov Stark. We discussed this idea in Darchai Naom Balak 5782, but it is such a powerful idea that it is worth repeating.

<sup>9</sup> See the Midrash Sifrei Devarim 357. Obviously the comparison between the wicked Bilaam and Moshe Rabbeinu ends there.

<sup>10</sup> Bamidbar 24:5.

<sup>11</sup> Baba Batra 60a.

<sup>12</sup> Midrash Aggadah Bamidbar 24:5, brought by Rashi in his commentary to this pasuk and to Bamidbar 24:2.

<sup>13</sup> Page 23 of "Building Foundations for life", cited in footnote 8 above.