

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Vayakhel
March 2024 / Adar I 5784

darchai.noam@gmail.com
www.darchai-noam.com

How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Vayakhel – The power of unity

We read this week's Parasha of Vayakhel the week after we read Parashat Ki Tisa which contains the terrible sin of the Golden Calf – the Egel Hazahav. How could such a sin have occurred? And what is the appropriate way to move forward and do teshuva?

Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky explains that the Jewish people's behaviour at the sin of the Egel Hazahav, was the opposite of their behaviour at the revelation at Har Sinai.¹ In Parshat Yitro we read about Bnei Yisrael camping at Har Sinai in perfect unity “like one person with one heart”². According to the Midrash,³ it was precisely because of this peace and unity that Bnei Yisrael merited receiving the Torah.

In contrast, at the time of the Egel Hazahav, there was disunity amongst Bnei Yisrael. In his commentary on last week's Parasha, the Ramban notes that the people actually wanted **multiple** idols to worship. Some sources⁴ indicate that Bnei Yisrael made twelve calves because they could not even agree on which calf to serve! According to these sources, each tribe (except the tribe of Levi⁵) created their own golden calf.

Thus, unity led to the revelation at Har Sinai – the single most important event in the history of the Jewish people. And disunity led to the Golden Calf – the lowest point in the history of the Jewish people.

If disunity was one of the underlying causes of the sin, it seems logical that Jewish unity would be its antidote, and one of the best ways to move forward. This seems to be Moshe's intention in the first pasuk of this week's Parasha:

*“Moshe gathered **the entire assembly** of the Children of Israel and said to them “These are the things that Hashem commanded to do them”.* (Sh'mot 35:1)

Moshe assembles all of Bnei Yisrael *together* and instructs them to work *together* to build the Mishkan, as commanded by Hashem. Working together in unity may help Bnei Yisrael rectify one of the underlying causes of the Egel Hazahav. This is even more effective when the nation is united in the holy task of building the Mishkan in accordance with the commandment of Hashem.

When Yaakov Avinu was about to face Eisav after leaving Lavan, he felt frightened. The previous time they had seen each other Eisav had sworn to kill Yaakov for stealing the blessings from their father Yitzchak. Yaakov prayed to Hashem:

¹ This idea was seen in “Short Vort” by Rabbi Moshe Kormornick, p94.

² Rashi to Sh'mot 19:2.

³ Tanna D'vei Eliyahu.

⁴ Gemara Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 10:2.

⁵ Levy is the only tribe that was unanimous in not participating in the sin. If Levi isn't counted as one of the tribes that sinned, we can still count twelve tribes and twelve golden calves by counting Yosef as two separate tribes (i.e. Menashe and Ephraim).

'Rescue me please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Eisav...'
(Breishit 32:12)

Why did Yaakov mention "my brother" and "Eisav" separately? The commentators⁶ explain that Yaakov had two concerns. First, that Eisav remained a physical threat to Yaakov and his family. Second, he was concerned that Eisav would act more like a brother and try to befriend Yaakov, thereby posing a spiritual threat to Yaakov and his family. Yaakov understood that this was an even greater threat, as indicated by the fact that Yaakov asked Hashem to rescue him first from his 'brother' and only second from Eisav. Today, unfortunately, the rates of assimilation and intermarriage demonstrate the risks of being welcomed into non-Jewish society.

Let's explore which of Yaakov's concerns is more dangerous to the continuity of the Jewish people. In the early 1800s in Eastern Europe, the Jewish community in Russia was suffering terrible persecution under the Romanov dynasty. At the same time, Napoleon was busy conquering territories throughout Europe and granting them liberal reforms. This liberalisation under Napoleon could bring a life of greater comfort and ease to the long-suffering Jewish community of Russia and Eastern Europe. When Napoleon turned his attention to Russia in 1807, the leaders of the Jewish community had to decide whether to support him or the existing Russian empire. As well as providing political and logistical support, when the Jews would turn to Hashem in prayer the question was which army should they pray for? The Rabbis decided to support Russia.

The Rabbis had a deep understanding of human nature and the risks of freedom and assimilation. In addition, historically, the Jewish people tend to be much more unified in times of persecution. We can see this phenomenon clearly. Though there are numerous political factions, as soon as the Jewish people are under threat, differences are put aside and we all come together. The Rabbis of Russia understood the critical nature of this unity. The Vilna Gaon⁷ explains that the Jewish people are granted a special protection by Hashem when we have peaceful relations amongst ourselves. The Shechinah (Divine Presence) only rests on the Jewish people when there is unity. When there is conflict, the Shechinah departs. This same phenomenon also occurs on a micro level, in our homes and with the members of our family.

This message is extremely pertinent to us today. Our enemies are doing their best to destroy us physically and the levels of antisemitism around the world are extremely high. We see that this has led to an outpouring of love and unity amongst Jewish people. However, what a price we had to pay to achieve this! Surely we would prefer to achieve this level of unity without the need for terror to push us to unite?! To solve this problem, we need to work as hard as possible to achieve 'V'ahavta l'rei'echa kamocho' without the external threats and violence.

Let's try something this week:

1. In order to increase Jewish unity without the need for enemies to force us into it, we can choose one person with whom we are currently in conflict and try our best to restore a peaceful relationship.
2. This might involve humbling ourselves. It might involve forgiving someone totally even though we don't believe they deserve forgiveness. And it might involve apologising even though we don't think we did anything wrong.
3. Remember that each individual act of shalom contributes to the overall unity of the Jewish people.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

* To subscribe please email darchai.noam@gmail.com

⁶ Pardes Yosef, quoting the Yalkut Shimoni; see Rav Frand on Parshat Vayishlach:

www.torah.org/learning/ravfrand/5757/vayishlach.html

⁷ Commentary to Mishlei (6:19).