

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Sh'lach
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Sh'lach – The importance of unity

The first three Parshiyot in sefer Bamidbar are predominantly optimistic. Bnei Yisrael have received the Torah and built the Mishkan, and now they are about to march into Eretz Yisrael. The focus is on the structure of the camp and preparations for entry into the Land.

In last week's Parasha of Beha'alotcha, Moshe invited his father-in-law Yitro¹ to join the people as they were literally about to commence their march into the Land: “We are travelling to the place about which Hashem said, ‘I will give it to you’. Come with us and we will be good to you, for Hashem has spoken of good fortune for Israel”. We can feel the excitement in the air!

However, already in last week's Parasha there appear some cracks in the form of Bnei Yisrael's complaints. And it is in this week's Parasha of Sh'lach, with the sin of the Meraglim, that everything comes crashing down. Entry into the Land is postponed for 40 years. The theme of the remainder of the book of Bamidbar lies in stark contrast to the optimistic beginning. Let's analyse this transition further.

The first three Parshiyot of sefer Bamidbar focus a lot on the orderly structure of the people, both when camped and when travelling. Each of the tribes has their set place in the camp, arranged in divisions, with the Mishkan in the centre. Each tribe had its own strengths and weaknesses and its unique role and contribution. For example,² Yehuda was the leader, and marched at the front, together with Issachar who were the Torah scholars and Zevulun who were involved in commerce. Reuven represented the power of teshuva and Gad symbolised strength, so it was fitting that they accompanied Shimon who needed atonement³. The people did not jostle for position, they understood their role and their position in the camp, and they were content with it.

It is no coincidence that we celebrated Shavuot during the reading of these Parshiyot. The giving of the Torah took place at a time of heightened national unity. Bnei Yisrael were camped around Har Sinai like ‘one man with one heart’⁴. And in that time of unity, we merited the greatest Divine Revelation that ever took place.

However, this week we face a different Parasha, containing the sin of the Spies. In Sefer Devarim we read another account of this event which provides us with some additional details:

*“And **all of you approached me** [i.e. Moshe] and said, ‘Let us send men ahead of us so that they will search out the land for us and bring us back word by which route we shall go up, and to which cities we shall come.’” (Parshat Devarim, Sefer Devarim 1:22).*

Rashi explains that the words “all of you approached me” reveals Bnei Yisrael's disorder. The young were pushing aside the elders, and the elders were pushing aside the leaders. The unity and orderliness that was so apparent in the beginning of Sefer Bamidbar had disappeared. Rashi contrasts this approach with the approach made at Har Sinai, where the people requested that Moshe

¹ Bamidbar 10:29. In this pasuk Yitro is called by one of his other names, Chovav. See Rashi's commentary to that pasuk.

² Based on the Ramban's commentary to Parashat Bamidbar.

³ The tribe of Shimon was the main protagonist in the sin of Baal Peor (see Rashi to Bamidbar 26:13).

⁴ Rashi to Shmot 19:2.

act as intermediary between the people and Hashem to receive the Torah.⁵ Rashi explains that the approach at Har Sinai was made properly, with young people respecting their elders, allowing them to go first. Hashem was pleased with that request: “they have done well in all that they have spoken”.⁶

We see that when Bnei Yisrael are united and orderly, and peace reigns between the people, great things can happen – the giving of the Torah; entry into the Land of Israel. But when there is no peace amongst the People, disaster usually follows.

We have quoted the following Midrash from Vayikra Raba in the previous editions of Darchai Noam. But its message is so pertinent here, that it is worth repeating. The Midrash compares the generation of King David with the generation of King Achav (the seventh king of the northern kingdom of Israel). In the time of King David, all of the people were righteous and learned in Torah, yet they suffered heavy casualties when they went to war. In contrast, the generation of King Achav was idolatrous. However, they suffered very few casualties when they went out to war. The Midrash explains that the people in King Achav's kingdom behaved respectfully towards each other, and they thus merited a special protection from Hashem.

History is repeating itself and we can see the same pattern before our very eyes. Before October 7 there was terrible disunity amongst the Jewish people, particularly in Israel. Since the horrors of October 7, combined with the drastic rise of antisemitism around the world, the Jewish People have become much more united. Yes, we have a way to go, but we have improved markedly. And look at the results. On 13 April, Iran attacked Israel with a massive barrage of missiles and drones, yet miraculously there was almost zero damage!⁷ It was a surreal feeling on Sunday morning in Israel. We knew that we had witnessed an open miracle. After Shacharit at my shul, the community broke out into a spontaneous rendition of Al Hanisim. It was muted, because we were still in the middle of the terrible war in Gaza and there were still many innocent hostages in horrific conditions. But we could not let such a miracle pass by without thanking Hashem. And then, just over a month later, the Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi **ימח שמו וזכרו** who was directly responsible for the Iranian attack, was killed in a freak helicopter accident. Clearly, this was a case of Divine retribution!⁸ It happened in the past and it happens again today – when we are united, amazing things happen. But when we are not united...

The message to us is clear. We need to strengthen our unity and peace to ensure continued Divine protection and miraculous salvation. We may feel that we cannot do much to influence unity amongst the Jewish People at large,⁹ but we can certainly have a significant and noticeable impact within our sphere of influence. Our family, our friends and colleagues. If there is anybody with whom we are not at peace, now is the time to reach out to them and improve the relationship. Hashem works middah k'neged middah. The external shalom of our People depends on the internal shalom amongst our people. Now is the time to make the difficult phone call to the person with whom the relationship has soured. Or send that email. Or meet in person. The safety of our Nation is depending on it, and on us.

Let's try something this week:

1. Set aside time to contemplate honestly – are there any people in your world with whom you are not as close as you should be.
2. Consider each relationship and what you can do to repair the breach. Now summon up the courage to do so!

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁵ Parshat Va'etchanan, Devarim 5:20.

⁶ Parshat Va'etchanan, Devarim 5:25.

⁷ Perhaps just as miraculous was the fact that so many countries, including Arab neighbours, joined forces to help defend Israel.

⁸ Despite rumours to the contrary, the pilot of the helicopter was *not* a Mossad agent called Eli Kopter. The Iranians will never find out who was responsible for the crash, because Hashem doesn't leave fingerprints!

⁹ This is actually inaccurate, it is amazing how much we can accomplish, even as individuals.