

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat B'shalach
February 2025 / Shvat 5785

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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

B'shalach – Why did the prosecuting angel wait until now?

In this week's Parasha of B'shalach, Bnei Yisrael finally leave Mitzrayim. But before they can escape Pharaoh's clutches once and for all, they face a final confrontation at the Yam Suf (the Reed Sea). Hashem is about to perform perhaps the most famous open miracle of all time - the splitting of the sea.

Camping by the sea on the sixth day after the exodus, Bnei Yisrael saw Pharaoh and his army approaching in the distance. They felt trapped between the Egyptians and the sea and could see no way out. A great argument broke out amongst Bnei Yisrael as to the best method of dealing with this crisis. Bnei Yisrael split into groups. The tribes of Zevulun, Naftali and Benyamin wanted to surrender. Yehuda, Dan, Ephraim and Menashe wanted to fight the Egyptian army. Levi, Gad and Asher wanted to make noisy diversions to frighten the Egyptians. Reuven, Shimon and Issachar wanted to jump into the sea.¹

We all know what ultimately transpires – the sea miraculously splits, Bnei Yisrael walk through to safety on dry land and the Egyptian army are washed away and destroyed once and for all. But the Midrash² reveals that the outcome was not so clear cut. On the night before the sea split³, the pillar of cloud that had been travelling in front of Bnei Yisrael moved behind them to protect them from the Egyptians. For the entire night the cloud stayed there and prevented the Egyptians from drawing near to Bnei Yisrael.

The Midrash teaches that a heavenly court case was being held that night. Bnei Yisrael were on trial. The prosecuting angel had a very strong case. He argued that it was not fair to save Bnei Yisrael and drown the Egyptians. Both nations deserved the same fate because both nations worshipped idols!

The prosecuting angel's argument seemed very convincing. While in Egypt, Bnei Yisrael were also involved in idol worship just like the Egyptians. So why should they be treated differently than the Egyptians? However, Hashem rejected this argument and defended Bnei Yisrael. Hashem knew the inner recesses of the hearts of Bnei Yisrael. Unlike the Egyptians, Bnei Yisrael did not voluntarily worship idols. They were only acting under the duress of their taskmasters.

However, a very strong question arises – why did the prosecuting angel only raise this argument now? He didn't raise it earlier when the Egyptians were struck with the ten plagues while Bnei Yisrael were not touched. Why not? Why didn't he complain when the first born of Egypt were killed while the first born of Bnei Yisrael were not harmed? Why did he wait until so late to make his claim? What was different about the situation at the seashore?

The answer may lie in the interactions amongst Bnei Yisrael at the time that they were trapped between the sea and the Egyptian army.⁴ As described above, a great argument broke out between the tribes. This seems to be the first example of serious disunity and lack of peace amongst Bnei

¹ “Let My Nation Go” by Yosef Deutsch, p337-338, based on the Sefer HaYashar.

² Yalkut Shimoni 1:234

³ See see Sh'mot 14:19-20.

⁴ The link between the events at the Yam Suf and the Heavenly court case that occurred that night is not my idea. Unfortunately, I cannot remember in whose name I heard this idea.

Yisrael. During the period of the plagues, there was a sense of unity amongst Bnei Yisrael, fostered or enhanced perhaps by their common situation of enslavement and the miracles that Hashem had brought about for their benefit. This unity amongst Bnei Yisrael may have served to protect them from the prosecuting angel. In contrast, while Bnei Yisrael were camped at the sea, they argued with each other. This the lack of peace was the opening that the prosecuting angel needed. This was his chance, and he grabbed it. (Thankfully he was not successful.)

We can learn from this incident about the special protection that Am Yisrael merit when we have peace and unity. The Shechinah (Divine Presence) only rests on the Jewish people when there is unity amongst us. When there is conflict, the Shechinah departs.⁵ Of course there is nothing wrong with disagreement. It is inevitable. There are many situations when reasonable people will disagree as to an appropriate course of action. But we have to disagree *respectfully* and with concern for each other's *feelings*. We can still argue our point forcefully, but we need to do it in the right way.

When the foreign minister of Australia visited Israel in January 2024, she had the chutzpah to preach to Israel. She said, "Of course, Israel has the right to defend itself, but it's the way they do it that matters".⁶ As an Australian citizen I was very embarrassed by her behaviour. However, everything that we hear or see happens for a reason. Hashem wants us to learn from everything that we experience. Perhaps we can learn an important personal lesson by slightly amending the words of Ms Wrong (I mean Ms Wong) as follows: "Of course we all have the right to defend our position and our point of view, but it's the way we do it that matters".

We can learn the same lesson from the comparison of the generation of King David with the generation of King Achav (the seventh king of the northern kingdom of Israel). In previous editions of Darchai Noam, we have discussed the Midrashic comparison of these generations.⁷ But the message is worth repeating again and again. 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, yet they suffered very few casualties at war. The Midrash explains that the people in King Achav's kingdom merited a special protection from Hashem because they behaved respectfully towards each other, even though they were idol worshippers!

If we want to merit this special protection against the prosecuting angel regarding our own sins, we can start by working on our achdut (unity) and shalom. As Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaCohen Kook, the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi in the times of the British Mandate, has been quoted as saying⁸:

"There is no such thing as "baseless love". Why is it baseless? He is a Jew, and I am obligated to honour him. There is only "baseless hatred", but baseless love? No!"

Internalising this message may assist us to work towards shalom and unity with every person with whom we interact.

Let's try something this week:

1. The next time that we have a dispute, remember the prosecuting angel and make an effort to speak to the other side with respect.
2. When we disagree with someone, we should try to give them a chance to present their point of view and listen to them respectfully. By being calm and assertive rather than aggressive, we can improve our chances of maintaining shalom and ultimately remembering that each of us is a fellow Jew created by the same Creator.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁵ The Vilna Gaon's commentary on Mishlei (6:19).

⁶ I never knew that the Honourable Minister was an expert in counterterrorism and urban warfare.

⁷ Vayikra Raba.

⁸ "An Angel Amongst Men", Simcha Raz.