

# DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

## “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Chukat  
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[darchai.noam@gmail.com](mailto:darchai.noam@gmail.com)  
[www.darchai-noam.com](http://www.darchai-noam.com)

How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

### Chukat – Stepping back, but not stepping away

This week's Parasha of Chukat is set towards the end of Bnei Yisrael's sojourn in the Midbar. Bnei Yisrael have spent almost 40 years living in a miraculous fashion. Their menu consisted of manna from Heaven. Their clothes did not wear out, but rather stayed fresh and clean and actually grew with them. The Clouds of Glory protected them from the harsh desert sun and allowed them to live in air-conditioned comfort. The Holy Ark would travel in front of the people, fighting their battles, killing snakes and scorpions and flattening mountains, to ensure that their journey was safe and comfortable. In short, all of Bnei Yisrael's physical needs were provided for them miraculously, so they were free to focus on learning Torah.

But this was scheduled to change when the people would enter the Holy Land. Then, they would need to start living more in accordance with nature. They would need to farm the land and produce their own food. They would need to make and repair their clothes and utensils. Their challenge would be to continue learning Torah and remaining holy, while being involved in the mundane day-to-day existence of building a nation in their own land.<sup>1</sup>

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks suggests that this changeover towards becoming self-sufficient in the Land may have convinced the spies to bring a negative report about the Land (as we learnt in Parashat Sh'lach). Perhaps the spies appreciated their comforts and life of ease in the desert and did not want the challenge of living in the Land in accordance with the laws of nature.<sup>2</sup> The spies weren't really afraid of losing against the inhabitants of the Land, rather they were afraid of winning! They didn't fear failure, they feared success.

However, the spies' view did not accord with Hashem's plan. Hashem wanted Bnei Yisrael to enter the Land and face all of the challenges that this would entail. Our role is not to try to outsmart or second-guess Hashem, especially when He provides us with a clear commandment. Perhaps that was the sin of the spies.

There is no doubt that the change from a miraculous existence in the desert to a more natural existence in Eretz Yisrael would be a great challenge. Generally, difficult changes require a more gradual approach. The “ripping off the Band-Aid” approach might be appropriate... when ripping off a Band-Aid. But it often doesn't work for major life changes.<sup>3</sup> Thus, Hashem in His kindness provided Bnei Yisrael with a gradual preparation for this change to life in Eretz Yisrael. Some of these changes can be seen in our Parasha. We see a gradual progression as Hashem starts to reduce the miracles for Bnei Yisrael. For instance:

- When Miriam passes away, the miraculous well stops providing Bnei Yisrael with water. The supply of water comes back temporarily (after Moshe famously hit the rock). However, after almost 40 years of continuous supply, Bnei Yisrael has to start getting used to the idea that the well will not last forever.
- When Aharon passes away, the Clouds of Glory depart. Again, the clouds come back temporarily in the merit of Moshe's prayers. However, Bnei Yisrael has to start getting used to living without their miraculous protection.
- Finally, after Moshe hits the rock, Hashem decrees that Moshe was going to pass away before crossing the Jordan River and would not take Bnei Yisrael into the Land. And at that time, the miraculous manna would stop falling.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Of course, Hashem would continue to perform miracles for Bnei Yisrael after entering the Land (for example, the miraculous defeat of Jericho described in Chapter 6 of sefer Yehoshua). However, the focus of life after entering the Land was to live in a much more natural, and less miraculous manner.

<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Fear of Freedom: <https://www.aish.com/tp/i/sacks/511373241.html>

<sup>3</sup> Of course, there are exceptions, when people are able to successfully turn their life upside-down overnight. But these cases are usually the exception that proves the rule.

<sup>4</sup> See Rashi to Yehoshua 5:11.

The time of crossing the Jordan River and entering the Land was approaching. There were many parallels between the crossing of the Jordan and the Exodus from Mitzrayim, for instance:

- Hashem split the Reed Sea and He split the Jordan River<sup>5</sup> allowing Bnei Yisrael to cross on dry land.
- There was a mass circumcision of the males before leaving Mitzrayim<sup>6</sup> and again upon entering the Land.<sup>7</sup>
- Bnei Yisrael entered into a covenant with Hashem at Har Sinai and they entered into another covenant upon entering the Land.<sup>8</sup>

When entering the Land, Bnei Yisrael's national mission would need to be performed in a less miraculous fashion and governed more by the laws of nature. Rav Michael Hattin<sup>9</sup> describes how this concept is reflected in some powerful imagery when Bnei Yisrael cross the Jordan River under the leadership of Yehoshua. First, the Kohanim carried the Ark into the Jordan River.<sup>10</sup> As soon as the feet of the Kohanim entered the edge of the water, the water stopped flowing at that point. As more water flowed from upstream, it miraculously banked up in a column so the people could cross on dry land. The pasukim describe in detail what happened to the Ark. At first, the Ark lead the way, when the Kohanim carried it into the middle of the dry riverbed. The Kohanim then waited in the middle of the riverbed, as the rest of the people crossed over. When the last person had crossed to the other side, the Kohanim then carried the Ark out of the river. As soon as all the people were safely on the other side, the waters of the Jordan returned to normal.

Rav Hattin gleans an interesting message from this scene. The holy Ark started off leading the way, in front of the people, just as it did during the 40 years in the desert. However, during the crossing, the Kohanim pause and the people start to overtake the Ark. Eventually, the Ark ends up *behind* the people. Rav Hattin suggests that this reflects the idea that the miracles are now taking more of a back-seat role. Hashem wants Bnei Yisrael to start increasing their hishtadlut (effort) and taking more responsibility for their physical lives. However, the fact that the Ark remains behind them and follows them onto dry land indicates that Hashem will still be there to support them. Even though Bnei Yisrael will need to use their own prowess and effort to maintain their physical sustenance, they need not fear failure because Hashem will always be there supporting them, behind the scenes. And perhaps the parallels with Yetziyat Mitzrayim that we noted above serve to reinforce this message. Hashem is telling Bnei Yisrael that He will be with them in the Land, just like He was with them during the Exodus from Mitzrayim, albeit in a more hidden way.

The same message applies to us today. Hashem wants us to do hishtadlut and be active in this world. Though we have left the desert, He does not, and will not, 'desert' us. He is right here with us all the time, providing for us in a more hidden manner, under the veil of nature. We need to work hard to ensure that we can always see His Hand behind it all.

Rav Kook points out that this is a significant risk with our performing hishtadlut. The more work we do ourselves, the more we are at risk of falsely thinking that we are responsible for our success and taking the credit. This risk does not apply when Hashem performs open miracles for us. Thus, Rav Kook writes that one actually needs to be on a higher spiritual level in order to perform extra hishtadlut without falling into this trap. But if we do perform hishtadlut in the proper manner, there is actually an important advantage to our emunah through hishtadlut over our emunah through miracles.<sup>11</sup> When a miracle occurs, we see Hashem's Hand clearly, but only for a moment. After the miracle is over, the effect will fade, and we will fail to see Him anymore. But if we can successfully see Hashem behind nature, then we can see Him every day, always there, guiding and supporting us.

Let's try something this week:

1. Remember - even though Hashem wants us to be pro-active and do our hishtadlut, He is still right there with us always.
2. The more hishtadlut we do, the greater the challenge to see Hashem in the outcome.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

\* To subscribe please email [darchai.noam@gmail.com](mailto:darchai.noam@gmail.com)

<sup>5</sup> See Chapter 3 of Yehoshua and in particular 4:23.

<sup>6</sup> See Rashi to Shmot 12:6.

<sup>7</sup> Due to the travails of wandering in the midbar, it was considered too dangerous to perform circumcisions on the males that were born during those 40 years (see Yehoshua 5:2-8).

<sup>8</sup> Yehoshua 8:33-35.

<sup>9</sup> Hattin, Rav Michael, "Joshua: The Challenge of the Promised Land (Studies in Tanakh)" Koren Publishers 2014.

<sup>10</sup> In reality, the Ark miraculously carried itself, however the Kohanim would hold on to the staves as if to give the appearance that they were carrying the Ark.

<sup>11</sup> I heard this insight from Rav Gideon Binyamin, Rav of Nof Ayalon.