

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 – Regaining clarity

In this week’s Parsha of Yitro, Bnei Yisrael receive the Torah at Har Sinai. This is the only time in the history of the world that Hashem reveals himself to an entire nation. It is difficult to even imagine how awe-inspiring and magnificent this event was.

*“And all of the people **saw the sounds** and the flames and the sound of the shofar and the smoking mountain; the people saw and they trembled and they stood from afar.”¹*

How can the people **see** sounds? Rashi explains that the ‘sounds’ refers to the words that emerged from Hashem’s ‘mouth’. On a plain reading of the pasuk, it seems that Bnei Yisrael **saw** the words of Hashem and saw the sounds of the shofar. Rashi quotes the Midrash which states that Bnei Yisrael actually saw that which is audible, something which is usually impossible.

To try to understand what this means, let’s explore the difference between seeing and hearing, two very different modes of perception.²

Seeing is experienced all at once. One glance at a complex picture provides us instantaneously with a complete mental image of the whole scene. On the other hand, auditory processing is more gradual. To understand speech, we need to hear each distinct word separately, one after another. The meaning only becomes clear once we have heard each word in order, and only then are we able to internalise the message. The saying “a picture is worth a thousand words” represents the notion that to accurately describe a picture can take many words and a long time.

Seeing is also generally considered better evidence than hearing. Witnessing an event with our own eyes is more verifiable than if we just heard about it. Hearing is subjective - we have to put together the components and interpret the meaning of the words. Seeing is more external and objective. It is true, there are optical illusions, and sometimes our eyes can play tricks on us, but generally “seeing is believing”. That is why the Hebrew word for seeing (R’iya) is almost identical to the Hebrew word for proof (R’aya). Both words are written as ראייה.

Our eyes can help us to see what is happening in the physical world around us. However, our eyes cannot help us to ‘see’ the spiritual world. We cannot see souls, angels, or Hashem³. This is where our sense of hearing comes to the fore, helping us to perceive the spiritual world by listening and talking about these ideas and concepts. That is why the physical world feels more real to us and the spiritual world can feel very abstract.

Let’s try to apply this idea to what happened at Har Sinai. Hashem peeled back the veil of reality and revealed Himself to us. Bnei Yisrael literally felt as if they were standing in front of Hashem. The spiritual world became real to them. It was as if they ‘saw’ the spiritual world with their eyes. They were on such a high level that they could perceive the unity behind everything. They

¹ Sh’mot 20:15.

² These ideas are based on a talk by Rabbi Akiva Tatz.

³ Hashem is not physical or spiritual. He is beyond these classifications.

perceived Hashem's existence and His One-ness with absolute clarity. When Hashem spoke to Bnei Yisrael, His words were as tangible to Bnei Yisrael as if they could 'see' them. Everything was crystal clear and beyond doubt. The best way to describe Bnei Yisrael's experience is by using the sense of 'seeing'. Using the analogy of sight helps us, who have not experienced such a revelation, to relate to this somewhat.

When we read the written word, we are using our eyes. However, we only see one word at a time. The mental process that we use to internalise the written message acts in the same way as when we listen to the spoken word. In a sense, we are 'hearing with our eyes'. It seems that we can also 'see with our ears'! Bnei Yisrael heard Hashem speak at Har Sinai, but they had absolute clarity – the clarity that is normally obtained through seeing.

Today, this clarity can seem very far away. We live in a complicated and confusing world full of doubt and confusion. It is often difficult for us to know what is right and how to behave. Just to use an analogy of how convoluted this world is, consider the humble Rubik's cube. The solution guide explains that if you make a singlet turn of one of the cube's faces every second, it would take you 1,400 trillion years to go through all the possible configurations! And the real world is vastly more complicated and confusing than a 'simple' Rubik's cube puzzle.

Our souls crave clarity and truth. How can we recapture some of the clarity that Bnei Yisrael were granted at Har Sinai? Where can we turn to for guidance? Though we can no longer access the Har Sinai experience directly, Hashem gave us the Torah as our guidebook and the Rabbis as our guides. We can turn to the Torah in order to know what Hashem wants from us at any given moment. And we can turn to the Rabbis who are best placed to give us guidance that is consistent with Torah values.

The Torah is more than just a book of rules relating to ritualistic commandments. The Torah has answers to every aspect of our lives – from how we conduct our business to how we relate to each other. If we want to re-capture the clarity that Bnei Yisrael experienced at Har Sinai, we need to turn to the only objective source of guidance, the Torah that Hashem has given to us.

But there is one more step that we can do. In order to even know what we are confused about, and to get the most out of applying the Torah to our lives, we must know ourselves. To know ourselves and our challenges better, we need to reflect on and review our lives regularly and ask Hashem for guidance.

The Ramchal advises as follows in Derech Eitz Chaim:

"A person goes by so many years of his life thinking about all kinds of things. Why can't he think at least an hour a day about who he is and why he came into this world, and what Hashem wants from him? And what will be his end? This is the greatest remedy against the Yetzer Hara. It is easy to do and the results are tremendous. A person, every day, should empty out all his thoughts for an hour a day."

Let's try something this week:

1. Consult a Rabbi to maximise our clarity in relation to ritual mitzvot, daily issues and life direction.
2. Seek out the answers to our life's questions from the Torah.
3. Set aside a regular period of time out of our day to reflect on where we are going and what Hashem wants us to do.