

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Vayechi – the promise of a double redemption

The final Parsha of sefer Breishit, parshat Vayechi, ends with Bnei Yisrael ensconced in Mitzrayim and the death of Yosef. The difficult years of slavery are about to commence. Before Yosef died, he gave his brothers chizuk (strength) by assuring them that the redemption would surely come.

“Yosef said to his brothers, “I am about to die, but G-d will surely remember you (pakod yifkod) and bring you up out of this land to the land that he promised to Avraham, to Yitzchak and to Yaakov” (Breishit 50:24)

Yosef used a double expression for remember (“pakod yifkod”). The double expression is used to reinforce the verb. Instead of merely saying “G-d will remember”, Yosef is saying “G-d will **surely** remember”. The commentators¹ explain that by using this phrase Yosef was passing on to his brothers a secret sign that he received from Yaakov before his death. This phrase (pakod yifkod) is apparently the phrase that the future, true redeemer would use to demonstrate his legitimacy. When Hashem ultimately sent Moshe to redeem Bnei Yisrael He told Moshe to use this term².

This sign was important in order to confirm to Bnei Yisrael that the redeemer was sent by Hashem and to prevent them from being misled by a false redeemer. Indeed this sign did save Bnei Yisrael in this manner. Thirty years before Moshe’s true redemption, a man called from Yagnon from the tribe of Ephraim arose. He tried to convince Bnei Yisrael that the time for the redemption had arrived. Yet he did not have much luck - he only managed to convince his fellow members of the tribe of Ephraim and he formed an army with them. Their first battle with the Egyptians was successful and they managed to escape from Mitzrayim. However their success was short-lived. On their way to Eretz Canaan they were all but wiped out by the Plishtim.³

Yet, surely the words that Yosef passed on before his death are not too difficult for imposters to recite. So how do these seemingly innocuous words harbour a ‘secret sign’ reserved only for the true future redeemer? Anybody who knew this code could turn up and say the magic words and claim to be the true redeemer! One answer is that Hashem ensured in a miraculous manner that only the true redeemer would use this phrase. However there is another explanation for this double expression of ‘pakod yifkod’. Embedded in this phrase lies the true secret of the divinely sent redeemer. The Shem mi’Shmuel on Parshat Vayechi explains that the double expression refers to a double redemption – a physical redemption and a spiritual redemption. The true redeemer would need to not only physically redeem the Jewish people but also provide them with a spiritual redemption. That is what Moshe offered when he arrived – both a physical freedom from slavery and a spiritual redemption through the giving of the Torah at Har Sinai. Guaranteeing such a spiritual redemption is not so easy for a false redeemer to fake!

¹ See for example Pirkei D’Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 47; the Mizrachi’s commentary on this passuk; footnote to this passuk in the Artscroll Stone edition of the Chumash.

² See Shmot 3:16. In sefer Shmot the term is used in the past tense rather than the future tense but the same double expression is employed.

³ According to one opinion, their corpses were the subject of Yechezkel’s famous prophecy about the dry bones that were resurrected. See Yechezkel Chapter 37 and the Gemara, Sanhedrin 92b.

There are two important lessons that we can learn from this idea.

1. Providing physical support is not always sufficient

Historically, the Jewish people have always been very generous with reaching out to the poor. Numerous surveys have confirmed that Jews are amongst the most generous givers⁴. The results are even more astounding when you look at households that are less wealthy. However we need to remember that taking care of people's physical needs alone may not be sufficient. For example, we also need to look out for their emotional and social needs. We also need to be more aware of our fellow Jews that need help in a spiritual sense. This can include teaching those that are less knowledgeable about Jewish practices, doing acts of kiruv and trying to help our fellow Jews come closer to Hashem.

When someone knocks on our door asking for money, it is not always enough to just hand over some cash and close the door. Sometimes the poor person on the other side of the door also needs a bit of your time, the chance to unload, a smile and some kind words.

2. We are still in exile!

Knowing the many years of oppressive slavery that lay ahead, Yosef tried to leave Bnei Yisrael with a comforting prophecy of a physical and spiritual redemption. This knowledge would provide Bnei Yisrael with the strength to survive the difficult times ahead – times of physical and spiritual oppression.

We too are in exile. However for many of us this exile is reasonably comfortable. Many Jews live lives of relative material wealth and freedom. The risk is that we may sometimes forget that we are still in spiritual exile! We may be so physically comfortable that we fail to yearn for spiritual redemption. This weakens our desire to end this exile and bring about the ultimate redemption. It is human nature that the more comfortable we feel physically, the less incentive we have to want things to change. We don't feel that we need such words of comfort like Yosef left for Bnei Yisrael.

We are commanded to yearn for the final redemption every day and to beg Hashem to send it speedily. There are many customs that we perform that are designed to remind us of the destruction of the Bet Hamikdash and deter us from becoming too complacent in our current exile. For example, the breaking of a glass under the chuppah and the rarely followed halacha to leave a square amah of unplastered wall in our houses as a memory for the destruction of Jerusalem⁵. Only this week we commemorated the fast day of the 10th of Tevet in memory of the siege of Jerusalem which ultimately lead to the Babylonian exile and the destruction of the first Bet Hamikdash.

So long as Jerusalem has not been rebuilt (in a spiritual sense, that is the rebuilt third Bet Hamikdash with Hashem's presence resting there) our joy should not be complete.

Let's try something this week:

1. When we look at our fellow Jews that are in need, remember that there is more to just physical needs. Try to make the effort to help them with their spiritual, emotional and social needs as well.
2. Remember that we are still in exile! (Especially those who are fortunate enough to live lives of physical comfort.) We should pray and yearn for the final redemption so that we will be finally at home with lasting peace.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁴ See for example: <https://www.philanthropy.com/article/Jewish-Donors-Are-Generous-to/154439>

⁵ See Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 560:1 and the Mishnah Berurah and other commentators there for a discussion of the parameters of this halacha and some of the bases for the lenient position.

About Darchai Noam

The passuk in Mishlei (3:17) describes the Torah as follows: "Its ways are ways of pleasantness (Darchai Noam) and all its paths are peace". The Torah is our guidebook for life. It is packed full of good advice as to how we should live our lives.

The aim of the Darchai Noam weekly email is to examine an idea from the weekly parashah relating to good middot (character traits). It will focus particularly on treating each other with respect and how to interact with each other in a more peaceful and pleasant manner. It will also suggest some practical tips for implementing these ideas in our daily lives.

By learning together each week, and making an effort to regularly put the ideas into practice, with Hashem's help we can all gradually improve our character traits and our observance of 'v'ahavta l're'echa kamocho' – loving one's fellow as oneself.

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