

## DARCHAI NOAM

### Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Chayai Sarah, October 2013

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How can the Parashah help us grow this week?

### The straw that broke the camel's back!<sup>1</sup>

We have a tradition that Avraham was tested 10 times. However, there are differences of opinion as to which incidents constitute these 10 tests.

For example, most commentators include Avraham being thrown into a fiery furnace by Nimrod as one of the ten tests. However, the Rambam excludes this incident because it is only brought in the Midrash and is not specifically mentioned in the Torah. Avot d'Rabbi Natan counts the sending away of Hagar and Ishmael as two separate tests, whereas many other commentators count this as one test. Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer counts Sarah being taken captive by Pharaoh and then again by Avimelech as a single test whereas most other commentators count these as two separate tests.

However almost all of the commentators agree that the tenth and final test was the hardest test of all: Akeidat Yitzchak, the requirement for Avraham to offer up his son Yitzchak as a sacrifice.

There is one notable exception. Rabbeinu Yona only counts the Akeidat Yitzchak as Avraham's ninth test. According to Rabbeinu Yona's list, the tenth test was the requirement to buy the burial plot for Sarah. We read about this incident in this week's parashah.

Hashem had promised Avraham that the land of Canaan would belong to him. Yet, Avraham had to negotiate with Efron to buy a plot of land to bury Sarah and he had to pay Efron a very large sum of money for that plot of land.

What was Rabbeinu Yona thinking? Surely, in contrast to the enormous challenge of sacrificing his son's life, the transaction with Efron regarding material issues such as finances and land would fade into insignificance. Why does Rabbeinu Yona count this incident as Avraham's tenth and final test?

Perhaps we can learn from Rabbeinu Yona something about human nature and our attitude to external events in our lives. A problem that may objectively be quite small can be magnified in our mind if we are going through a difficult time.

Let's try to imagine how Avraham was feeling after the Akeidat Yitzchak. He had passed nine gruelling tests (according to Rabbeinu Yona's list) and his beloved wife had just died. His nerves were frayed and he was ready to retire. Under normal circumstances, the interaction with Efron would just be annoying. However, after the accumulation of everything that Avraham had experienced, this altercation with Efron could be the straw that broke the camel's back.

Consider the following scenario<sup>2</sup>:

<sup>1</sup> This week's Darchai Noam is based on an idea that I heard from Rabbi Garfunkel at a seudah shlishit a number of years ago.

Today Jonathan has the most important business meeting of his life. He can't afford to mess this one up. But things aren't going according to plan. Firstly, he sleeps through his alarm clock. Then he discovers that he is out of coffee. He spills his breakfast on his shirt, and then he discovers that his only other clean shirt has not been ironed. Then he can't find his car keys. Finally he is ready to go. He grabs his briefcase and sprints for the door. If the traffic goes his way he might just make it to the meeting on time...

Jonathan's 5 year old son Benny is learning to tidy up his toys. He put away almost all of his toys yesterday, without his mummy having to ask him. He just forgot one toy – his shiny new toy car which he was playing with near the front door of the house.

Unfortunately, Jonathan trips over the car and falls flat on his back, his important papers strewn all over the floor.

Jonathan's test is how he reacts to his son in this moment. Objectively and in isolation, this test is not so difficult. His son's negligence caused him a minor bruise and delay on his way to work. What is the big deal? However, knowing how his morning has run so far we understand why this is such a challenging test for Jonathan.

We reach certain tolerance points beyond which we cannot deal with seemingly simple challenges, often because our reserves of strength are depleted by the accumulation of our previous stressors. When we are at the end of our tether, our emotions kick in and we may find it difficult to think straight. So what chance does Jonathan have of keeping his cool?

Imagine that the night before his meeting Jonathan received a visit from a prophet. The prophet told Jonathan that he will not make it to his meeting tomorrow. Another business opportunity would come up the following week, worth double as much. Jonathan was going to have only one test for the whole day - whether he can control his temper with Benny after he slipped on his toy car. Jonathan's attitude would now be very different. After the accident he would give Benny a hug and tell him that he is proud of the effort that he is making to clean up his toys. He would then gently point out the car and ask Benny to keep up the good work and try to be even more careful in the future.

Unfortunately we are not visited by prophets these days. So what practical strategies can we put in place to buoy our coping abilities in times of repeated stress?

Let's try something this week:

1. Tune in and be aware of when we feel our ability to cope is almost exhausted.
2. Take a few deep breaths.
3. Imagine that our only test for this day is whether we can keep our cool when the next annoyance comes our way. Imagine that all of the other annoyances were only for the purpose of bringing us to this point and that Hashem himself is watching to see if we can pass the test.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Allon Ledder

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<sup>2</sup> Based on an idea heard from Rabbi Akiva Tatz in the name Rav Ades.

## **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'reiacha kamocho' – loving one's fellow as oneself.

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