

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Chayai Sarah, November 2016

darchai.noam@gmail.com

How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Chayai Sarah – the importance of kindness

In this week’s Parsha of Chayai Sarah we read of Eliezer’s famous encounter with Rivkah by the well. Avraham sent his trusted servant Eliezer to Aram Naharaim to find a suitable wife for Yitzchak from among Avraham’s extended family. To choose the appropriate candidate, Eliezer designed a test. He decided to ask the girls at the well for a drink of water. If a girl responded “drink and I will even provide water for your camels” he would deem that as a sign that she was the best candidate.

The commentators discuss whether Eliezer’s behaviour constituted nichush (superstition) which is forbidden by the Torah¹. The Rambam² explains that it is forbidden to rely on signs. An example of a forbidden sign would be: “since this thing happened, I will not leave home today”. However, the Ran³ distinguishes Eliezer’s behaviour because his chosen sign was not merely arbitrary but rather logically connected to the decision he was trying to make.

For example, the following would constitute forbidden nichush: “If it rains this morning then that is a sign that I should not proceed with my business decision”.

In contrast, the following would be permissible and rational: “If it rains this morning then I will stay home because the roads are dangerous when they are wet”.

Eliezer’s “sign” was attached to a rational reason. He was looking for a bride for Yitzchak, the second mother in the chain that would give birth to Am Yisrael. Eliezer understood that it was critical that such a lady exhibited the trait of chesed. Thus his scheme was deliberately designed to determine who at the well possessed this crucial character trait. Someone who would voluntarily offer to provide water for ten camels would obviously have a well-developed middah of chesed. Such a person would certainly be a fitting wife for Yitzchak and daughter-in-law for Avraham.

It is well known that chesed and loving kindness are fundamental to a Torah life. For instance, in the morning brachot we include “acts of kindness” in the list of mitzvot that have no measure⁴. The Chofetz Chaim published “Ahavat Chesed” as a comprehensive guide to the concept of chesed and acts of loving kindness. Avraham, the founder of the Jewish people was particularly known as being a man of chesed. And Rivkah, the next link in the chain, was selected specifically because she also exhibited this trait.

¹ “Lo T’nachashu” (Vayikra 19:26).

² Hilchot Avodat Kochavim 11:4.

³ Rabbeinu Nissim of Gerona in his commentary to Masechet Chulin. This also seems to be the approach of Rashi as per his commentary to Breishit 24:14.

⁴ Quoted from Mishnah, Peah 1:1, see page 17 of the standard Artscroll Ashkenaz siddur.

Rivkah actually went way above the call of duty and exhibited an amazing level of kindness. A thirsty camel can drink as much as 135 litres (30 gallons) of water in about 13 minutes⁵. Since Eliezer had ten camels, offering to provide water for all of the camels until they had finished drinking would involve great time and effort:

“When she finished giving him a drink she said “I will also draw [water] for your camels until they have finished drinking.” So she hurried and emptied her bucket into the trough and kept running to the well to draw water, and she drew for all his camels” (Breishit 24:19-20).

Yet this may not be the full extent of her kindness. The Beit HaLevi suggests a further kindness embedded in Rivkah’s behaviour.⁶ She had just offered a drink from her bucket to a total stranger. It was possible that this stranger was sick and had contaminated the water in her bucket with germs. Taking the bucket of water home could endanger her family. On the other hand, pouring out the remaining water may embarrass Eliezer. Rivkah thus decided to give the remaining water to the camels to drink. But it might still look like she was just watering the camels so as not to embarrass Eliezer, which may in itself make Eliezer feel uncomfortable. Therefore Rivkah watered the camels until they had finished drinking so that it would be clear that Rivkah was totally concerned for the camels. Thus Rivkah was showing care not just for the camels but also complete consideration for Eliezer’s feelings. This reveals the true extent of Rivkah’s kind nature and sensitivity for the feelings of others.

Eliezer’s choice of sign is a source in the Torah of the high esteem in which chesed is held. We can learn from Rivkah to not only look out for opportunities to perform acts of chesed but to also go the extra mile when doing so and to carefully consider all of the potential effects of our actions.

Let’s try something this week:

1. Look out for opportunities to perform acts of kindness. Try to emulate Rivkah and make a real effort to go outside our comfort zone.
2. Being a giver is often easier than being a recipient. If we are in the fortunate position of being placed by Hashem in the position of doing a chesed, we must try to do so with sensitivity and consideration of the other person’s feelings.

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Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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⁵ <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/weepingcamel/thecamels.html>

⁶ I first heard this idea from Rabbi Yirmi Garfunkel.

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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