

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Chayai Sarah, November 2017

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Chayai Sarah – the middah of malchut

This week's Parsha of Chayai Sarah begins with the death of Sarah, Avraham's wife. The pasuk¹ informs us that Sarah was 127 years old at the time that she passed away. The Midrash² draws a connection between the life of Sarah and the story of Purim. When Esther was forced to marry King Achashverosh, she became Queen over 127 provinces³. Rabbi Akiva explains that Esther was a descendant of Sarah who lived for 127 years and therefore Esther ruled over 127 provinces. Apart from the numerical coincidence, what is the deeper connection between Sarah and Esther?

We see from the Gemara⁴ that Sarah, like Esther, had a connection to royalty. Sarah's original name was Sarai which means “my princess”. The Gemara explains that her name was changed to Sarah,⁵ which means “princess” in an unqualified sense, because she became a princess over the whole world.

However, Rav Yissocher Frand⁶ points out that this description of Sarah as a princess does not seem accurate. When reading the narrative in the Torah, we don't see Sarah ruling over the world. On the contrary, Sarah seemed to play more of a passive role and events happened to her. For example, she was barren for many years and she was taken captive by Pharaoh and then again by Avimelech⁷.

Rav Frand explains in the name of Rav Nissan Alpert⁸ that in spite of everything that happened to her, Sarah was able to maintain her faith and her equilibrium. Sarah was able to rule over her own emotional responses. In that sense she was like a queen - more powerful than a ruler that rules over the entire world. Similarly, Esther was able to maintain her faith and equilibrium during an extremely tumultuous period. She was an orphan who was taken against her will to the King's palace. She could very easily have forsaken her people for the easy life of the palace. However, she ruled over her emotional response and managed to precipitate the rescue of the entire Jewish people. Thus Esther merited to rule over 127 provinces – almost the entire known world at that time.

We see that Sarah and Esther both excelled in the middah (character trait) of malchut, which translates as “royalty”. Someone with malchut is able to rise above their surroundings and remain less affected by what is happening around them.

Generally, we only have limited control over our surroundings and the events that happen to us. But with effort, we can exert control over our level of emunah and over our responses to what happens to us. This is no easy task. We are only human and it is difficult to remain unaffected by the vicissitudes of life. For example, most of us can't help but feel good when we are complimented and defensive when we are criticised. The following extract from Chovot Halevavot⁹ describes a level that we should be aiming for:

*One of the pious asked another, “Do you possess equanimity?”
 “In what sense?” he asked.
 “Are praise and insult equal in your eyes?”
 “No.”*

¹ Breishit 23:1.

² Breishit Rabbah 58:3 in the name of Rabbi Akiva.

³ Megillat Esther 1:1.

⁴ Brachot 13a.

⁵ Breishit 17:15.

⁶ <https://torah.org/torah-portion/ravfrand-5756-chayeisarah/>

⁷ See Parshat Lech Lecha (Breishit 12:10-20) and Parshat Vayera (Breishit, Chapter 20)

⁸ 1927–1986, one of the main students of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein.

⁹ “Duties of the Heart”, Section 5: The Gate of Wholehearted Devotion of All Acts, Chapter 5.

“Then you have not yet arrived. Make the effort! Perhaps you will reach this level. For it is the highest level among the pious and the most precious of virtues.”

Note that the person being questioned is already considered to be ‘pious’, yet he is still affected by insults. Though it seems unrealistic to expect mere mortals to be able to remain unaffected by criticism, we should be working towards this level.

How can we work towards this level of malchut in a practical sense? The following story provides a clue:¹⁰

Today Jonathan has the most important business meeting of his life. He can’t afford to mess 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 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 five 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. It should not be such a big deal. However, knowing how his morning has run so far we understand why this is such a challenging test for Jonathan. We all reach certain tolerance points beyond which we cannot deal with seemingly simple challenges. Our emotions kick in and we find it difficult to think straight.

Now imagine that the night before his meeting Jonathan received a visit from a prophet. The prophet told Jonathan that there is no way he will make it to his meeting. However, there is no need to be concerned because another, better business opportunity would come up the following week. The prophet then informed Jonathan that his only test for the whole day was going to be whether he can control his temper with Benny after slipping on his toy. Armed with such knowledge, Jonathan’s attitude would probably be very different. He would be much more likely to forgive Benny, hug him 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. However, perhaps if we spend a few minutes each evening reviewing our day and contemplating the potential challenges of the next day, we might be more forewarned and forearmed and less likely to fall prey to our emotions.

Another strategy to apply in the moment would be to ask ourselves “How would Hashem see this situation from above?” This visualisation may enable us to distance ourselves from the event and put it into perspective.

If we can control our emotional response we can use our intelligence and rise above the fray, even in very emotional times.

Let’s try something this week:

1. When faced with a challenging situation, try to imagine that our only test for that day is whether we can keep our cool. 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.
2. Try to regularly review our day, anticipate our future challenges and prepare for the day ahead. In this way, we can try to learn from Sarah and Queen Esther to strengthen our middah of malchut and rule over ourselves and our responses.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Ledder.

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¹⁰ Based on an idea heard from Rabbi Akiva Tatz in the name of Rav Ades.

About Darchai Noam

Darchai Noam is available online at www.divreitorah.net/darchai-noam. You can access this week's edition of Darchai Noam, archived back issues of Darchai Noam and other divrei Torah.

The pasuk 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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