

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Chayai Sarah
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Chayai Sarah – The power of giving thanks

In this week's Parasha of Chayai Sarah, we read about Eliezer's¹ mission on behalf of Avraham to find a wife for Yitzchak. Eliezer travelled to Aram Naharaim and met Rivka by the well. When Rivka gave Eliezer water and then offered to water his ten camels as well, Eliezer knew that she would make a suitable wife for Yitzchak. Eliezer then met the family to discuss the proposed match. Let's focus in on one aspect of that discussion.

Eliezer explained the background of his mission to Lavan and Betuel (Rivka's brother and father²) and described the miracles that had occurred. It was clearly the Divine will that Rivka and Yitzchak be married.

Lavan and Betuel responded: “This matter is from Hashem. We cannot say anything to you – bad or good. Here is Rivka before you. You may take her and let her be the wife of your master's son as Hashem has spoken”. (Breishit 24:50-51)

The Torah describes Eliezer's response as follows:

When Avraham's slave heard their words, he prostrated himself to the ground to Hashem (Breishit 24:52).

In his commentary to this verse, Rashi says that we can learn from Eliezer's response that it is appropriate to give thanks when we receive good news. This seems like a fairly obvious comment for Rashi to make. However there must be more here than meets the eye, as Rashi's comments are never just obvious. The Be'er BaSadeh³ notes that at this point in Eliezer's mission, he was not yet guaranteed to be successful. For example, Rivka might not have agreed to go with Eliezer, there could have been a mishap on the way back, or perhaps Yitzchak himself might not consent to the marriage. Nevertheless, Eliezer still gave thanks to Hashem for this piece of good news. Rashi's comment thus teaches us that we do not need to wait until the successful conclusion to express our gratitude. We should rather thank Hashem for every piece of good news and kindness that he bestows.

Indeed, we see that Eliezer had already expressed his gratitude to Hashem at an earlier stage, when his mission was even less sure of success. After Rivka had confirmed that she and her family were related to Avraham, Eliezer “bowed low and prostrated himself to Hashem”.⁴ This in itself was another piece of good news and another reason to pause and feel gratitude.

¹ Eliezer is not mentioned by name throughout this portion, but the Midrash teaches us that it was in fact Eliezer.

² The pasuk mentions Lavan before Betuel to show us that Lavan pushed himself to the front and did not respect his father.

³ Seen in Artscroll's Sapirstein edition of the Chumash, footnote 1 to Breishit 24:52.

⁴ Breishit 24:26.

Rashi's commentary above refers to Eliezer as *thanking* Hashem. However, the Hebrew word that describes Eliezer's action is actually יִשְׁתַּחוּ which usually means "he bowed". This suggests that the two meanings are related – bowing and giving thanks. There is a good reason for this. When we give thanks to someone, we are acknowledging that we need their help. This in turn acknowledges that, in at least in some respects, they are greater than us and we are their subordinate. That is why we symbolically bow down, as if to show our submission. And that is why people may often find it difficult to say thank you - it is acknowledging that we need someone else and that can sometimes be difficult for one's ego.

Expressing our gratitude regularly can help us to focus on the good in our lives which in turn boosts our happiness. By focusing on the effort rather than waiting for the successful outcome (as we learnt in last week's Darchai Noam) we can say thank you more often and thus maximise the benefit of doing so. Advising someone to "count their blessings" might just sound like a cliché, but the repeated response by Eliezer teaches us the Torah approach to life. And this is reinforced by our regular tefillot and the brachot which we say before and after eating.

Specifically, we regularly have the opportunity to bow before Hashem and say thank you – in the Modim bracha of every Shemoneh Esreh tefillah, when we bow at the beginning and the end. After we finish turning to Hashem and asking for all of our needs, we say thank you. When reciting Modim, we should recognise all the good in our lives that Hashem has bestowed on us, including both the 'biggies' and also the 'littlies'.

And if we missed the chance to properly pay attention during Modim, we have a second chance! We repeat the Modim bracha during the Chazan's repetition of the Shemoneh Esreh (known as Modim D'rabbanan – the Rabbi's thanksgiving). The Abudraham⁵ explains that we need to say a personal Modim D'rabbanan because a proper thank you must be said personally. It's just not the same if it's done through a shaliach (agent).

The Modim bracha lists many of the things that Hashem does for us and for which we are grateful. The end of Modim D'rabbanan has an amazing phrase: "We thank you... for the fact that we thank you"! We are grateful for the fact that we have the opportunity to turn to Hashem, to speak directly to Him, and to express our gratitude. Imagine having a guaranteed personal audience with a king three times a day, every day! What an enormous privilege. And it has the added bonus of making us feel psychologically positive and happy. This is a wonderful expression of the lesson that Rashi taught us – saying thank you at every opportunity, even before we see the successful outcome of our prayers.

Thank you, Hashem, for allowing us to thank You!

Let's try something this week:

1. Read through the words of the Modim bracha (both the regular version and Modim D'rabbanan) before the next time you pray. Read the English translation if necessary, so that you have a full understanding of the meaning of the words.
2. Before you recite Modim, pause for a few seconds and try to imagine that you are standing before the King and this is your opportunity to thank Him for all of the kindnesses that he has bestowed on you. Then say thank you like you really mean it!

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁵ A Rishon who lived in Seville, Spain in the 14th century and is known for his commentary on the siddur.