

DARCHAI NOAM**Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם**

(Mishlei 3:17)

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Lech Lecha – what does Hashem want us to do?

This week's Parsha of Lech Lecha begins with Hashem's famous command to Avraham:

“And Hashem said to Avram¹ “Go for yourself from your land and from your birthplace and from the house of your father to the land that I will show you”. (Breishit 12:1)

This is the beginning of Avraham's role as the father of the Jewish people.

Despite this fundamental responsibility, the Torah portion itself does not clearly elaborate on Avraham's identity and history. Avraham was briefly introduced at the end of last week's Parsha, when we learnt about his family tree, his wife and a journey that he took with his father. However, within the Torah framework itself, Avraham's identity remains a mystery. It is unclear why Avraham, who is about to enter into a special covenant with Hashem, deserves such special treatment. In last week's parsha the Torah introduces Noach as a tzaddik in his generation and explains why he was singled out to be saved from the flood. In contrast, this week's Parsha seems to start in the middle of the story.

The Midrash fills in the gaps for us and shows us why Avraham deserves to be the father of the Jewish people. There is the famous story about Avraham smashing the idols in his father's shop. The Midrash also teaches us about Avraham being threatened by the wicked king Nimrod and told to worship idols or be thrown into a fiery furnace. Avraham refused and he was thrown into the furnace but he survived miraculously. The Midrash also explains that Avraham discovered Hashem on his own and that he was committed to spreading the knowledge of Hashem to as many people as possible.

Yet, though the Midrashic teachings enlighten us as to who Avraham was and why he was singled him out for special responsibility, it seems strange that this crucial background is not provided in the Torah itself. Instead, the Torah starts this Parsha with Hashem commanding Avraham to pack up and leave his hometown and go to Eretz Yisrael.

Perhaps the Torah wants us to appreciate the importance of Hashem's explicit command to Avraham. Even more important than the wonderful stories depicting Avraham's middot during his youth is the obligation to follow Hashem's commandments.

By introducing this Parsha with Hashem's commandment to Avraham, we learn that finding out what Hashem wants us to do and then doing it to the best of our ability should be our primary focus in life. As well as mitzvot between man and G-d, this lesson is equally true for the mitzvot that apply between man and man. Many of the mitzvot between man and man seem logical and clear-cut. However there are many cases that are not black and white. We all know that murder is wrong. But what about abortion? Capital punishment? Killing civilians in a war of self-defence?

We need objective guidance and the only real objective source is Hashem and His Torah.

¹ His name was later changed to Avraham.

Without truly objective guidance, even the laws that are obvious can be distorted beyond all recognition. For example, the Nazis believed that murder was wrong and deserved to be punished. However they considered certain people to be sub-human so the laws of murder did not apply to them.

We all face a multitude of issues that arise in our daily interactions, situations where it is often unclear as to the best way to act. Consider the following story (based on a true story).

Devorah was an amateur shadchanit. She was always looking to match potential couples. She had a keen understanding of people's personalities and she was quite successful in matching people with an appropriate partner. One day she had a wonderful idea for a match. Chaim had been divorced for over a year and he had moved to Devorah's city. Devorah thought of Esther who was also divorced and was living in another city. Devorah knew that Chaim and Esther would be perfect for each other. She was very excited to introduce them. But then she remembered that Chaim's ex-wife lived in the same city as Esther. Devorah knew that Esther would find it difficult to relocate but Chaim was much more mobile. Should Devorah proceed with the introduction? It could make Chaim and Esther happy. But it could also be a source of pain for Chaim's ex-wife. What is the appropriate thing to do in this circumstance?

Sometimes we might have the best intentions but we just don't know what the best course of action is. In these circumstances, the correct approach to take is: "What would Hashem want me to do?" This can be a very difficult question to answer. Unfortunately, we don't have access to prophecy these days. However a Rabbi who knows you and understands your circumstances is often a reliable and objective source.

As well as providing Halachic guidance, a Rabbi can also be an objective source of Torah wisdom for questions that are not strictly based on Halacha. But how can a Rabbi know what Hashem wants in a given circumstance? The following story may shed some light on this.

Adam was the oldest child in his family. When his mother passed away, Adam was appointed as executor of her estate. He had responsibility for arranging the funeral and many other issues surrounding the estate. There were lots of decisions to be made: Which cemetery? What type of gravestone? What inscription should be on the headstone? In which newspaper should the death notice be placed? Adam was always very decisive. He knew exactly what to choose and he each time that he made a decision he said "That's exactly what Mum would have wanted". But how did he know what his mother would have wanted? The answer is that he had spent a lot of time with his mother. He had lived in her house for many years. He knew his mother very well and he could confidently guess what his mother would have wanted.

Rabbis who spend their time in Hashem's house (ie the Bet Midrash) studying Hashem's laws are often most suited to tell us what Hashem would want us to do in any given circumstance.

Let's try something this week:

1. Remember that Lech Lecha begins with Hashem giving Avraham a command, teaching us that we must always turn to Hashem's commandments in order to decide what to do in our daily lives.
2. If you're not sure what Hashem wants you to do in a particular situation, ask someone. A Rabbinic authority can provide an objective and reliable source of information even in cases which are not purely Halachic.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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 parsha 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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