

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Lech Lecha, November 2016

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Lech Lecha – You’ve got to have faith

At the end of last week’s Parsha we were introduced to Avraham Avinu (or Avram as he was originally called). In this week’s Parsha of Lech Lecha we begin Avraham’s story. And his story begins with the command of “Lech Lecha”.

Hashem commanded Avraham to leave his home and travel to an undisclosed destination. Avraham obeyed a G-d that no-one else recognised, he cut all ties with his homeland, packed up his belongings and left. When he left, he didn’t even know where he was going to! He followed Hashem’s command without complaint and he travelled to the land of Canaan. All new immigrants can surely empathise with the enormity of this test.

The test of “Lech Lecha” was one of the tests that Hashem gave to Avraham. Our sages teach us that Hashem tested Avraham ten times¹ and he passed each of those tests. That is one of the reasons why Avraham merited becoming the father of the Jewish people.

Yet the challenges did not stop for Avraham. Soon after his arrival Avraham was confronted with a severe famine in the land. He was forced to leave the land of Canaan and travel to Egypt to escape the famine. And Egypt was not a very safe place! Avraham was forced to claim that his wife Sarah was his sister out of fear that the Egyptians would kill him to take her. And he did all this without complaint.

All of the major commentators list this famine and the journey to Egypt as another one of Avraham’s ten tests.² They all agree that Avraham passed this test successfully. Indeed the Rambam learns from this incident that one is permitted to leave the land of Israel for reasons of parnassa (livelihood).

Astoundingly, the words of the Ramban in his commentary to the Torah appear to lie completely at odds with this view:

Know that our forefather Avraham unwittingly committed a great sin, for he brought his righteous wife to a potential pitfall of sin because of his fear that the Egyptians may kill him. Instead, he should have trusted in G-d that He would save him and his wife and all that was his, for G-d has the power to help and to save. Furthermore, his leaving the land that he was originally commanded to move to, due to the famine, was an iniquity which is a sin, for he should have known that G-d in famine would deliver him from death. And it was on account of this act of Avraham that exile in the

¹ There are some differences amongst the commentators as to how to enumerate the ten tests. The test of Lech Lecha is either the first (Rambam), second (Bartenura) or third (Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer) of Avraham’s tests.

² The Bartenura in his commentary on Pirkei Avot, Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer (Ch 26-31), Avot d’Rabbi Natan (Ch 33), Midrash Sochar Tov (Tehillim 18), Rambam in commentary on the Mishna, Rabbeinu Yona in his commentary on Pirkei Avot.

land of Egypt, under Pharaoh's hand, was decreed upon his descendants.
(Ramban's commentary to Breishit 12:10)³

Remarkably, the Ramban claims that Avraham sinned greatly in leaving the land of Canaan and that this sin was the reason that Avraham's descendants, Bnei Yisrael, would eventually suffer during the exile in Egypt!

The Ramban's view is controversial and some commentators strongly disagree with him.⁴ However, perhaps we can somehow reconcile the Ramban's view with the other approach?

One possible answer⁵ is that the test itself did not concern Avraham's choice of what to do (ie to stay in Canaan or travel to Egypt) but rather his level of faith in these very tricky circumstances. One can imagine that Avraham would want nothing more than to settle down peacefully in his new home, especially since it was the land that Hashem had promised to give him as a heritage. Hashem was testing Avraham's reaction – to see whether he would become angry, complain or lose faith. He was not necessarily testing him in relation to the decision itself. Thus, the Ramban may hold that Avraham chose an inadvisable route and mistakenly placed his wife in danger. The Ramban and others disagree and hold that Avraham made the correct decision. However this does not negate the fact that Avraham acted with complete faith - and perhaps that is the true test which everyone agrees he passed. And ultimately that is the true test of all of us. Can we hang on to our faith, or even strengthen it, during our greatest challenges.

There is an important distinction between the choices that we make and how the process affects our faith in Hashem. We often find ourselves in difficult situations. Though we must seriously consider what is the right decision, and carefully consider the outcome of our choices, this is not necessarily our true test. Our true test is our ability to stay strong in our faith that Hashem is there and watching out for us, and to use the situation to become even closer to Him. Our true test is whether we can:

- see Hashem's hand behind the challenge;
- accept that it is for our best; and
- turn to Him for support and assistance and not in anger.

Let's try something this week:

1. When we find ourselves in difficult situations, we need to remind ourselves that there is often no single correct answer. The issue is not the decision itself so much as how we act during the decision making process.
2. When we are struggling with difficult situations, we can strive to strengthen our faith in Hashem during the process.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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³ Translation based on the Artscroll Graff-Rand edition of Ramban's commentary on the Torah.

⁴ For example the Maharal in Gevurat Hashem.

⁵ This idea is based on an article published in Torah Tidbits, a publication of the Orthodox Union Israel for Parshat Lech Lecha in 2015.

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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