

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Lech Lecha – our strengths and weaknesses

In this week's Parsha of Lech Lecha we read about Avraham's experiences after arriving in the land of Canaan. Almost immediately after settling in his new home, the land was hit with a severe famine. Avraham was forced to travel to Egypt in search of food. Chazal count this event as one of Avraham's ten tests of faith.

Upon arriving in Egypt, Avraham was concerned that the immoral Egyptians would kill him in order to take Sarah for themselves. Avraham therefore asked Sarah to pretend to be his sister in the hope that this subterfuge would save his life.¹ Interestingly, there was another participant in this incident who played an important, yet passive role in the ruse. Though the Torah doesn't mention him explicitly, we know from the Midrash that Lot (Avraham's nephew) was also present with Avraham and Sarah at this time. Lot's main role was simply staying silent in the face of Avraham's deception.

What is the significance of Lot staying silent? To answer this question we will need to fast forward to next week's Parsha of Vayeira. As we will read next week, Lot and some of his family were saved when the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were overturned.

“And it came to pass, when G-d destroyed the cities of the plain, that G-d remembered Avraham, and he sent Lot out of the midst of the destruction when He overturned the cities in which Lot had lived” (Breishit 19:29)

What does the remembrance of Avraham have to do with the rescue of Lot? Rashi explains²:

Hashem remembered that Lot knew that Sarah was Avraham's wife, and Lot heard Avraham say in Egypt that Sarah was his sister (so that the Egyptians wouldn't kill Avraham to take his wife). Lot did not reveal the truth because he had pity on Avraham. Therefore Hashem had pity on Lot.

Lot certainly acted correctly by not revealing Avraham's secret. However, it seems that this great reward was disproportionate to his passive act of remaining silent. Lot's behaviour doesn't seem so impressive. Most people in Lot's position would not even dream of revealing a secret that had the potential to cause the murder of their own uncle!

Furthermore, there is another act of Lot that seems to be a better candidate for Hashem's reward.³ When the angels came to visit Sodom, Lot extended hospitality to them at great personal risk. He welcomed them into his home and personally protected them against the vicious inhabitants of Sodom even though his life was at risk. Surely this act should have earned Lot the right to be saved?

The Be'erot Yitzchak explains that Lot had a strong desire for money. This is revealed in his choice to live near Sodom because the land was fertile and could support his enormous flocks.⁴ Lot was Avraham's next

¹ This in itself is very strange. Why would the Egyptians be comfortable committing the serious crime of murder but hesitate to commit adultery? B"H we will explore this question in three weeks' time for Parshat Toldot, when a similar incident occurs with Yitzchak and Rivkah in the land of Gerar.

² Paraphrased from Rashi's commentary on Breishit 19:29. Rashi's comment is based on the Midrash Breishit Rabbah 51:6.

³ See Breishit 19:1-9.

⁴ See Breishit 13:10 and the commentary of the Ramban. The other reason that is given for Lot choosing this location is that he was attracted to the immoral nature of these cities (see Rashi's commentary to this verse).

of kin. If Avraham was to be murdered by the Egyptians, Lot stood to inherit Avraham's fortune. In keeping quiet in the face of Avraham's deception to the Egyptians, Lot had to overcome his natural desire for wealth. Hashem rewarded Lot for his ability to overcome his natural tendencies and keep quiet. On the other hand, Lot's display of hospitality was nothing extraordinary. Lot was raised with Avraham, the paradigm of hospitality and kindness. Being hospitable came naturally to Lot and he did not have to work particularly hard in this area.

Each one of us has our own natural areas of strength and weakness. We can learn from this incident with Lot that Hashem rewards us much more in areas where we struggle and grow than in areas in which we naturally excel. This lesson can teach us to recognise, accept and reward other people when they struggle to grow in areas of difficulty. This can take a lot of patience and awareness. It can be quite frustrating for those of us that have natural talent in a certain area to tolerate and appreciate others who are struggling in that area. For example, we might be stuck behind a driver that is not confident and drives very slowly. We might have employees, colleagues, students or children that 'just don't get it' and need multiple explanations. However, if Hashem can reward Lot to such a degree for struggling to overcome an area of inherent weakness, then we can certainly try to have more patience and tolerance when dealing with people who are struggling in a certain area. Furthermore, when we notice someone succeed in an area that is challenging for them, we should be generous (and genuine) in our praise.

We can also apply this patience and tolerance to ourselves. We might be struggling with a certain mitzvah or a certain area of personal growth. It can be helpful for us to remember that if we manage to succeed in this area, our reward will be magnified. We can and should be proud of ourselves when we manage to grow and move outside our comfort zones.

We can also learn another, related lesson from Lot and his descendants. Just as Hashem rewards us greatly in areas where we exert much effort, so too He judges us very strictly in those areas in which we are naturally strong⁵. Two of Lot's descendants – Ammon and Moav are forever forbidden from marrying in to the Jewish people. The Torah provides us with two reasons for this severe treatment: (i) because they hired Bilaam to curse Bnei Yisrael; and (ii) because they didn't greet Bnei Yisrael with bread and water when they were travelling from Egypt.⁶

We can understand the seriousness of hiring Bilaam to curse and destroy the entire nation. But it appears harsh to punish these nations in such an extreme way simply for not extending hospitality to the Jewish people in the desert. Why did this treatment warrant such a serious punishment? The Be'erot Yitzhak explains that Ammon and Moav inherited a natural tendency to give hospitality from their ancestor Lot (as we saw above when Lot risked his life to protect his visitors in Sodom). Since Ammon and Moab had already been gifted with a particular strength in the area of hospitality, they were expected to excel in this area and were judged strictly as a result.

In order to apply these lessons in a practical way to our lives, we need to know our own strengths and weaknesses, and those of our friends and relatives. Once we know our natural gifts, we can try extra hard not to slip up in these areas as we realize that they are unearned gifts that must be used properly. Similarly, we can be gentle on ourselves and others in our areas of weakness. We can reassure and motivate ourselves and others with the incentive of a magnified reward for our struggles in these areas.

Let's try something this week:

1. Become more self-aware of our strengths and weaknesses. Be careful to strive higher in our areas of strength and inspire ourselves to try growing in our areas of weakness by reminding ourselves of Lot's reward.
2. Be patient and tolerant of family and friends who we see struggling with their weaknesses. When they do succeed in overcoming their weaknesses even a little, praise them sincerely and exuberantly.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder.

⁵ Based on an idea from Rabbi Yehonatan Gefen, <https://rabbiygefen.blogspot.co.il/2009/08/making-most-of-our-strengths-ki-seitsei.html>. Rabbi Gefen credits the Be'erot Yitzhak for this idea.

⁶ Devarim 23:4-5.

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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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