

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Lech Lecha
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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Lech Lecha – the events of the fathers are a sign for their descendants

In this week's Parsha of Lech Lecha, we read about many of the journeys of Avraham¹ and Sarah and some of the incidents that occurred to them along the way. For example:

“Avram passed into the land as far as the place of Shechem, until Elon Moreh. The Canaanite was then in the land.” (Breishit 12:6)

Some of these details seem to be somewhat unimportant and one may wonder why the Torah records all of these details.

In his commentary to this week's Parsha, the Ramban explains that there is a very important principle at play here, known as “Ma’aseh Avot, Siman L’Banim” (everything that occurred to the forefathers is a sign for their descendants). In other words, when the Torah records an event in the lives of the forefathers it foreshadows a parallel event that will occur to the Jewish people in the future.

The Ramban refers to this principle numerous times in his commentary to the Torah and there are many examples:

- Avraham was instructed to walk the length and breadth of the land of Israel because this would make it easier for his descendants to conquer the land in the time of Yehoshua.
- When Avraham entered the land he arrived at Shechem first. This alludes to the fact that his descendants would conquer Shechem before the rest of the Land.² (In fact, we see that Yaakov's children conquered Shechem even before the descent to Mitzrayim.)
- Soon after arriving in the Land, Avraham and Sarah were forced to travel to Egypt due to a famine.³ While in Mitzrayim, Sarah was captured and mistreated by Pharaoh. Eventually Avraham and Sarah left Egypt with great wealth. There are many parallels between this incident and the descent of Yaakov and his children to Mitzrayim which was also due to a famine. They were also mistreated and they also eventually left with great wealth.
- Yitzchak built a number of wells. The Ramban⁴ explains that these wells represent the building of the Batei Hamikdash. The first two wells provoked a harsh response from Yitzchak's enemies – these correspond to the two Batei Hamikdash that were destroyed. The third well was built without conflict or dispute and it relates to the third Bet Hamikdash that will be eternal.

The Ramban goes on to explain this concept of Ma’aseh Avot more deeply⁵. He explains that when a Heavenly decree is issued, and the decree is combined with a symbolic act, the decree becomes irrevocable. The symbolic act serves the purpose of bringing the decree from the realm of the potential to the realm of the actual. The Ramban explains that this is one reason why the prophets often performed a physical act in the course of their prophecies. For example, the prophet Elisha prophesied that the

¹ Then known as Avram.

² See Ramban's commentary to Breishit 12:6.

³ See Breishit 12:10-20.

⁴ See Ramban's commentary to Breishit 26:20 (Parshat Toldot).

⁵ See the continuation of the Ramban's commentary to Breishit 12:6.

Kingdom of Yehudah would defeat their enemy Aram⁶. He then instructed King Yoash to shoot arrows into ground. King Yoash shot three arrows and then stopped. Elisha informed him that King Yoash would therefore have three victories over Aram. We also see that Moshe and Aaron performed physical acts before the plagues and before the other miracles that occurred during the Exodus.⁷

However, evidently the symbolic act does not **cause** the decree to be fulfilled. It is not causative, but rather symbolic. So why does Hashem require such a symbolic act? If Hashem so chose, his decrees could come into effect without any action on our part. Perhaps one explanation is that Hashem wants us to contribute our minimal hishtadlut (personal effort) even while at the same time recognising that Hashem Himself is really causing the outcome. This is clear in the case of the prophecies and miracles referred to above where the minimal action of the prophet is absurdly small. However we can also extrapolate this principle and apply it to all aspects of human endeavour. Though Hashem controls all outcomes, He requires us to do our little part to create a vessel through which He can send His blessing.

The Chovot Halevavot gives a beautiful explanation for the interplay between hishtadlut and relying on Hashem. If one is hungry, they cannot just sit down and expect Hashem to satisfy their need. One needs to make an effort and participate in the process. Even if the food is laid out before them, at a minimum one must raise the food to his mouth and make the effort to chew the food. Yet one needs to remember that despite their effort, the food with all of its nutrition and the energy that it gives, was created by Hashem.

The higher one's emunah and spiritual level, the lower is one's obligation to contribute hishtadlut. The following story is told of Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld.⁸ His wife once told him that they were short of money. So he got up and walked outside the house, looking at the ground. He very soon saw a gold coin. He picked it up, gave it to his wife and then immediately returned to his learning.

Another story⁹ is told of a poor chasid, Rabbi Menachem Mendel from Vitebsk who was on his way to visit his Rebbe, Rabbi Dov Be'er from Mezritch. Rabbi Menachem Mendel saw a coin on the ground and was about to pick it up. But then he thought to himself, "If Hashem wanted me to have that coin then I wouldn't need to go to the trouble to bend down and pick it up". So he ignored the coin and continued on his way. Meanwhile, another man saw the coin, picked it up and ran after the chasid. He called out "I think this is your coin, you must have dropped it". He then placed the coin into his pocket.

Most of us 'ordinary folk' need to put in much more hishtadlut than Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld or Rabbi Menachem Mendel from Vitebsk. However, we must remember that despite our efforts, the outcome is only from Hashem. As an added bonus, if we can maintain this outlook we are less likely to become emotionally involved in the outcome. This means that if we are successful, we are less likely to become proud and if we are unsuccessful, we are less likely to become depressed.

Let's try something this week:

1. Let's try to make the effort to remember that our involvement is really just a symbolic act, like the actions of the prophets and Avraham's journeys and adventures.
2. When things go well – remember that Hashem is in charge of the outcome and our involvement is minimal. It is certainly not a reason to become proud.
3. When things do not go so well – we also need to remember that Hashem is in charge of the outcome and there is no need to become depressed.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁶ See this incident in Melachim II, 13:15-19.

⁷ For example, Aaron striking the Nile with the staff in order to turn the water into blood (Parshat Vaera, Shmot 7:20) and Moshe lifting up his staff and stretching out his arm over the sea in order to split it (Parshat B'shalach, Shmot 14:16).

⁸ 1848-1932, the co-founder and leader of the Edah HaCharedit in Jerusalem during the time of the British mandate.

⁹ This story was heard from a good friend who prefers to remain anonymous.

About Darchai Noam

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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, usually 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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