

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Lech Lecha
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Lech Lecha – Customer loyalty

In this week's Parsha of Lech Lecha, we read about Avraham and Sarah's¹ travels to the land of Canaan. Soon after arriving, there was a terrible famine, and they were forced to travel to Egypt.² We shall focus on the return journey back to the land of Canaan after Avraham and Sarah's experiences in Egypt.

And Avram was very heavy with livestock, with silver and with gold. He proceeded on his journeys from the south to Bet-El to the place where his tent had been at first, between Bet-El and Ai. (Breishit 13:2-3)

The words “on his journeys” seem superfluous. In his commentary, Rashi explains that this phrase refers to the journeys that Avraham had made on his way to Egypt. When Avraham returned to the land of Canaan from Egypt, he made sure to stay in the same lodgings where he stayed on the way to Egypt. Rashi explains that this teaches us proper conduct – a person should not change his lodgings when he is travelling on the same route.

Rashi's commentary is based on the Gemara³. Why is it so important for a guest to choose the same lodgings? The Gemara explains that if the guest chooses to stay somewhere else it can cast negative aspersions on the original host and his lodgings. People may assume that the host was not a good host and that is the reason why the guest chose not to return. Alternatively, people may assume that the guest himself was not well behaved or was a difficult customer and therefore the host had asked him to leave.

How can we apply this to our own life?

Sometimes, we are genuinely unsatisfied with a business, service provider or supplier that we are dealing with. There might be sufficient justification to shop around and find someone else. But this Torah teaching encourages us not to be so rash when we make such a decision. Before we change, we should consider what effect this might have on their business and reputation. And we should balance this against how dissatisfied we are with the service. Perhaps we are blowing things out of proportion and acting a bit unfairly. Here are some ideas we might take into account before deciding to stop using a particular business.

1. Putting it into perspective

Nathan once told me of a holiday that he took to Asia.⁴ He was visiting one of the famous markets, well known for its extremely cheap (probably counterfeit) articles. He was bargaining with one of the suppliers for about 45 minutes over a particular item. He became caught up in the spirited negotiation. Finally, it got to the point where both parties refused to budge. Nathan stayed strong and he returned to his hotel without buying the article. When he did the maths later, he realised that they were arguing over about 20 Australian cents⁵ and he'd wasted three quarters of an hour of his precious time to do so!

Sometimes we are so affronted by the action of another person that we start to take it personally. However, if we take a deep breath, step back and look at the bigger picture, we may realise that their actions are not personal and are not such a big deal in the general scheme of things.

¹ At this point in the narrative they were still known as Avram and Sarai. Their names will be changed to Avraham and Sarah in Parashat Lech Lecha (Breishit, Chapter 17).

² This famine and the requirement to leave for Egypt was one of Avraham's ten tests.

³ Arachin 16b.

⁴ Back in the days when we were allowed to take holidays! Nathan (name changed for obvious reasons) was actually a high school maths teacher. This significance of that piece of information will become clear in a moment.

⁵ About 14 US cents or 48 Israeli agurot for those who are interested.

2. Whose fault was it anyway?

Another friend of mine ordered a new part for his computer. Since Corona he has been doing a lot of his purchases online. This item was taking a long time to arrive and he was concerned that there was a problem. The vendor sent him a number of emails saying that the item was waiting for him at his local post office and he should pick it up. But he did not receive a message from the post office like he usually did when a package arrived. The post office had no record of such a package. He was getting quite frustrated and was tempted to post a nasty comment on the vendor's website to share with the world how dissatisfied he was with the service. Thankfully he didn't, as he eventually realised that he had inadvertently provided his old phone number with the order. This was the reason why he wasn't receiving any of the messages from the courier.

We might be very angry at the service that we receive from a supplier. But sometimes, perhaps sometimes, we might be partially (or even fully!) to blame.

3. Saving money

What about if we find a cheaper supplier? Surely saving some money is a good reason to change suppliers? The following idea might help to shift our perspective.⁶

The Mishnah in masechet Shabbat⁷ teaches us when one would be liable for extinguishing a candle or lamp on Shabbat.⁸ One of the cases that the Mishnah brings is a person who extinguishes a lamp in order to preserve the oil or the wick.⁹ The language of the Mishnah is interesting – it says “on” which literally means “as if one is preserving”. Why did the Mishnah use the term “as if” instead of stating it how it is – that he *is* preserving the oil or the wick?

A person may think that he is saving money by desecrating Shabbat. But in reality, it is not true. It is only “as if” he is saving money. If he saves money here, Hashem will make sure that he loses it somewhere else. And if he loses money by keeping Shabbat, Hashem will make sure that he will be repaid somewhere else. It only *appears* as if he is saving money. In reality, his bank balance was already determined on Rosh Hashanah.

We might be doing business with someone who is struggling financially. Or maybe they are going through a hard time personally and another rejection might be extra painful for them. If we decide to stay with that business for an altruistic reason, even though it might be costing us a little more, Hashem will make sure that we are repaid. We just need emunah and patience to see how our loyalty will be repaid.

Let's try something this week:

1. Before cutting ties with a business / service provider, try cutting them a little slack and give them a second chance.
2. Try to put things into perspective. Think about whether we are also to blame. If it's just a matter of a little money, try to balance the situation of the business owner against the impact that it will have on our bottom line – and remember that Hashem can repay us in many ways!

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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⁶ I heard this idea from Rabbi Dovid Ostroff in the name of HaRav Sholom Shwadron ztz"l.

⁷ Chapter 2, Mishnah 5.

⁸ Note – in usual circumstances, it is *always* forbidden to extinguish a candle on Shabbat. The Mishnah is discussing which cases are forbidden Biblically and which cases are forbidden Rabbinically. There are some cases where it would be permissible to extinguish a candle on Shabbat or to ask a non-Jew to do so (e.g. in cases of pikuach nefesh or dealing with people that are sick). One would need to speak to their local Orthodox Rabbi for the parameters.

⁹ In those days, people were not as wealthy as we are and oil and wicks had real value. Even people who are relatively quite poor by today's standards would be much more well off in terms of possessions than people in the past. It is hard for us to understand why someone would want to extinguish a candle to preserve the wick!