

## DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

### “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Vaera  
January 2018 / Tevet 5778

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

### Vaera – stop fooling yourself

In this week's Parsha of Vaera we read about seven of the plagues which Hashem inflicted upon Mitzrayim. Five of those plagues were preceded by a warning to Pharaoh. The following is Hashem's instruction to Moshe to warn Pharaoh before the first plague:

*“Go to Pharaoh in the **morning**, behold he will be going to the water, and you shall stand opposite him on the bank of the **Nile**...and you shall say to him...”*  
(Parshat Vaera, Shmot 7:15-16).

This isn't Moshe and Pharaoh's only early-morning rendezvous at the Nile. The Nile is also the location for Moshe's warning to Pharaoh before the fourth plague of wild animals<sup>1</sup>. Why do we need to be told when and where Moshe was to warn Pharaoh? What is significant about the Nile and the time of day?

The Midrash explains.<sup>2</sup> Pharaoh claimed to be a god. Therefore he did not want to be seen to have normal bodily functions. He decided to issue a decree forbidding anyone from leaving their home before a certain time in the morning. While the streets were still empty, he would rush to the river to take care of his bodily needs. This meant that Pharaoh would only relieve himself once a day! For the rest of the day he would hold himself back in order to maintain his facade of being a deity. Hashem specifically commanded Moshe to confront Pharaoh at the one time of day when he was acting human in order to expose his charade. This would demonstrate to Pharaoh that Hashem knew all of his secrets.

There is a well-known quote:

*“If you repeat a lie often enough, people will believe it, and you will even come to believe it yourself”.*<sup>3</sup>

It seems that Pharaoh wasn't just fooling the Egyptians. He had also managed to fool himself. He must have believed that he was divine, otherwise why else would he continuously deny Hashem's existence even with the proof of the plagues? It was only after six of the plagues that Hashem had to harden Pharaoh's heart. Until that point he was essentially pulling the wool over his own eyes!

Pharaoh was the most powerful man in the world at the time. He had built up an image of being invincible, a god. He probably enjoyed this image very much. It would have been very difficult for

<sup>1</sup> Parshat Vaera, Shmot 8:16.

<sup>2</sup> See Rashi's comments to Parshat Vaera, Shmot 7:15. See also the various Midrashim quoted in “Let My Nation Go” by Yosef Deutsch, page 195.

<sup>3</sup> This quote has been attributed to the Nazi Propaganda Minister, Goebbels, however the authenticity of this attribution is questionable. See: [https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Joseph\\_Goebbels](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Joseph_Goebbels).

Pharaoh to admit even to himself that he was a mere mortal, and that Hashem existed and was truly all-powerful.

Most of us are also not perfectly honest, not only when we portray ourselves to others but even when we portray ourselves to ourselves! Sometimes we talk ourselves up and pretend to be who we are not. Perhaps we are a bit too aggressive when we market ourselves in our professional capacity. Perhaps we bend the truth slightly when we describe ourselves. Sometimes we cover over our character flaws and pretend they are not there. It can be painful to take a close look at ourselves, warts and all. Humans are creatures of comfort and we don't like feeling uncomfortable. An honest introspection challenges two fundamental human drives – the drive for comfort and also the drive for honour.

The following humorous analogy provides an insightful explanation of this phenomenon<sup>4</sup>.

*Reuven had a sore on his arm. He knew that it could be treated but the treatment would be painful. Reuven didn't want to face the prospects of a painful treatment, so he placed a band aid over the sore and tried to ignore it. His plan was working well, but the band aid kept on falling off. So Reuven covered the band aid with some more sturdy plaster. He then found that his sleeve was rubbing against the plaster and irritating his sore. So he decided to wrap some foam around the plaster. Unfortunately he could no longer fit his arm into the sleeve of his clothes so he had to order special made-to-measure shirts and jackets. When winter came, he couldn't get a raincoat that would fit over his arm. So he cut off the sleeve of his raincoat and constructed a special waterproof covering to keep his arm dry. The bulky plastic coating was rubbing against his body and was quite uncomfortable so he added an extra layer of padding. By now, his specially designed contraption was so large that he was having difficulty fitting into the front door of his house. Reuven now had no choice... he would have to call a tradesman and look into widening the door...*

Though exaggerated, this anecdote reveals the lengths that people can go to in order to avoid being honest with themselves and dealing with the root cause of their flaws. Like Pharaoh, it may seem easier to just continue covering up the truth. But sooner or later, the truth catches up to us. Living a lie eventually becomes more and more uncomfortable as our soul yearns to break free and wants the truth to come out.

How can we avoid falling into this trap of deluding ourselves? We need to set aside regular time for thinking and looking at ourselves honestly in order to understand where we are holding and what we need to work on. This requires setting aside quiet time to contemplate. It also requires a hefty dose of courage. But the dividends are enormous. Facing who we really are and where we are at is the only way we can know our current reality. And the only way to truly grow.

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to set aside some regular quiet time to reflect on where we are holding and what we need to work on. The Jewish sources suggest that a few minutes each night before going to bed is a good time for this. We can reflect on our behaviour throughout the day.
2. Don't be afraid to look at ourselves honestly. We all have faults. It might be uncomfortable to admit it, but in the long run we will be better off acknowledging and accepting them rather than ignoring them and deluding ourselves.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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<sup>4</sup> I read this analogy a number of years ago but unfortunately I can no longer locate the source. If anyone knows the source please let me know.

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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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