

DARCHAI NOAM

Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם

(Mishlei 3:17)

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Vayera – the power of prayer and patience¹

This week's Parsha of Vayera contains the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Hashem informs Avraham of his intention to destroy these wicked cities. Avraham begs for mercy on their behalf.

“Will You even destroy the tzaddikim with the wicked? Perhaps there are 50 tzaddikim in the city. Will you even destroy and not forgive the place because of 50 tzaddikim?”
(Breishit 18:23-24)

Hashem agrees not to destroy the cities if 50 tzaddikim can be found. Avraham then bargains Hashem down to 10 tzaddikim. Hashem agrees not to destroy the cities even for the sake of 10 tzaddikim. But there are not even 10 tzaddikim. The destruction will proceed. Thus ends chapter 18 of Sefer Breishit. The actual destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is described in chapter 19.

It's a sensible place to end the chapter – Avraham's long plea for mercy has been unsuccessful. But the chapter breaks in the Torah actually have no basis in Jewish tradition. The Archbishop of Canterbury - Stephen Langton - is credited with dividing the Torah into chapter and verse in the 13th Century. However the text of the Torah is also divided another way. The text as it appears in a Torah scroll is divided into paragraphs. In a Chumash the position of these paragraph breaks is usually marked with a Samech or a Peh². Hashem, not the Archbishop, decided to divide the text in this way.

Going back to our Parsha, it's interesting to note that there is no paragraph break at the end of chapter 18. Avraham's pleas for mercy have been unsuccessful but the text continues. From a Divine perspective, the story is not yet over...

The angels arrive in Sodom. Avraham's nephew, Lot, invites them to his home. Some of Avraham's good middot have rubbed off on Lot and he knows that the visitors will not last long on the street in the wicked city of Sodom. After an eventful night, the angels save Lot, his wife and two daughters just before Hashem rains down fire and brimstone to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. Lot's wife defies the instructions and turns around to watch. She is punished by turning into a pillar of salt. Avraham sees the destruction from his home on the mountain and the Torah informs us that Hashem remembered Avraham and therefore He rescued Lot. Lot and his two daughters escape to a cave. Lot's daughters erroneously believe that the entire world has been destroyed and that they are the only survivors. They come up with a plan to get their father drunk so that they can repopulate the world. Two babies are born – Ammon and Moab. Only now, after a very long block of text, does the paragraph end.

¹ This week's Darchai Noam is based on an idea that I heard from Rabbi Lawrence Keleman. The relevance of the end of the paragraph in the Torah text was explained to me by Rabbi Dov Tarkieltaub.

² These denote 'closed' and 'open' paragraphs. A closed paragraph is when the next paragraph begins on the same line as the end of the previous paragraph. There is a gap in the text to show where the paragraph break appears. An open paragraph is where the next paragraph begins on the next line.

The story ends with the birth of Moab and Ammon. We know that Ruth will come from Moab. Ruth will marry Boaz and become the great grandmother of David Hamelech. We also know that Naamah will come from Ammon. Naamah will marry Shlomo Hamelech and their son, Rechovam, will continue the Davidic dynasty. The Davidic dynasty will ultimately give rise to the Moshiach. This means that the incident with Lot and his daughters gave rise to the direct ancestors of the Davidic dynasty and, ultimately, the Moshiach!

Now we can understand why there was no paragraph break after Avraham's plea for mercy. Avraham's prayers and the birth of Moab and Ammon are included in the same paragraph because they are part of the same story. Avraham's prayers for Sodom and Gomorrah only seem to be unsuccessful. In reality, his prayers were successful in the most amazing and unpredictable way. Avraham's prayers resulted in Lot being saved and Moab and Ammon being born. This planted the seed for David Hamelech and the Moshiach.

We learn from here the importance and the power of prayer and patience. We may not see our prayers being answered immediately or even in our lifetime. However, just like Avraham's prayers were eventually successful beyond his expectations, so too our prayers are heard and have an impact. They may not be answered in the way that we expect, and we may not see the results of our prayers, but they undoubtedly have an effect. Rabbi Aryeh Levine summarises this idea beautifully:

"When your life on earth ends and you come before the court of justice in Heaven, you will find out how many severe and harsh decrees against the Jewish people were torn up, made null and void, because of those precious holy tears you shed... Not one teardrop goes to waste. The Holy Blessed One counts them like pearls and treasures them".³

Hashem wants us to pray to Him for everything in our lives. Every aspect of our lives requires a lot of hard work. But the results of our actions and efforts are not within our control. For instance, given the intricacy of the human psyche and the complicated nature of human relationships, it is only with Divine mercy and guidance that human beings can successfully interrelate.

By davening to Hashem and asking for His help we achieve the following:

- we recognise and acknowledge the source of our success;
- we bring Hashem into the picture; and
- we help to avoid gaiva (feelings of pride) in the face of success.

But after we have prayed that is where patience and faith kick in. We realise that Hashem is listening and that our prayers are never wasted. We must feel confident that we have the ability to change things through our prayers, even if we cannot see immediate success.

Let's try something this week:

1. Before embarking on any undertaking, turn to Hashem and ask for his assistance. It can be during the Shema Koleinu bracha in the Shemoneh Esreh. Or it can be any time you like. Use your own words and just ask Hashem for help.
2. Whether we appear successful, or G-d forbid the opposite, realise that Hashem is ultimately in charge. Our prayers **are** having an effect whether we can immediately see the results or not.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

³ A Tzaddik in our time, p126.

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 parsha 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'reiacha kamocho' – loving one's fellow as oneself.

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