

## 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 – being a true friend

Many Jewish buildings are decorated with plaques commemorating the people who generously donated towards the cost of building our communal facilities. “This chair was proudly donated by...”. “This window was donated in loving memory of...”. The plaques are a great source of recognition and honour for the generous donor. This practice is encouraged in Jewish tradition because it motivates others to be equally generous.

This week’s Parsha of Vayera begins with the famous story of the three angels that appear to Avraham when he is recovering from his Brit Milah:

*“Hashem appeared to him [Avraham] in the plains of Mamre, and he was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat of the day” (Breishit 18:1).*

The “plains of Mamre” was a field that belonged to Avraham’s friend Mamre. This is actually the third time that the Torah tells us that Avraham was living in the plains of Mamre<sup>1</sup>. Why does the Torah tell us where Avraham was located? It’s like one of those plaques that we see in a Jewish school or shule – “This field was proudly donated by Mamre”. What did Mamre do to earn the merit to have his name mentioned three times as the owner of the field where Avraham lived?

Rashi quotes a Midrash that explains that Mamre gave Avraham good advice in relation to the Brit Milah and therefore he merited that the three angels would appear to Avraham in his field and his name would be recorded in the Torah for eternity.

Let’s explore the details of this advice that Mamre gave to Avraham. When Hashem commanded Avraham to perform his circumcision, Avraham sought advice from three friends. This is surprising. Avraham willingly jumped into a fiery furnace rather than bow down to an idol. He packed up his bags and left his homeland upon being commended to do so by Hashem. He was even willing to sacrifice his own son because Hashem commanded him to do so. It seems strange that he was uncertain whether to follow Hashem’s command to perform the circumcision to the extent that he needed his friends’ advice.

In his commentary to this Parsha, Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch explains that Avraham was never in doubt as to whether or not he should follow Hashem’s will and perform the circumcision. Rather, he was seeking his friends’ advice regarding what other people would think of him after he had performed the Brit. The circumcision was just the physical act. The Brit also involved a covenant between Avraham and Hashem that would be passed down to Avraham’s descendants. A covenant brings two sides together but it also excludes all of those that do not enter the covenant. Therefore he asked his friends for advice. He was concerned that after entering into this special covenant with Hashem he would no longer receive visitors and that his kiruv work would suffer. He wanted to understand the lay of the land – what would the goyim think about him after he entered into the covenant? Would he still be able to bring others into the service of Hashem?

Let’s now see what response he got from his three friends.

- Anar advised Avraham not to perform the Brit. “You are already 100 years old. Why should you cause yourself such pain now?”

<sup>1</sup> The other two times are Breishit 13:18 and Breishit 14:13.

- Eshkol also advised Avraham not to perform the Brit. “Why should you make yourself stand out physically amongst your enemies?”
- Mamre was the only one of the three friends that advised Avraham to perform the Brit. “Your G-d who stood by you at the fiery furnace, against the kings at war and during famine now tells you to do the Brit Milah. Of course you should do what He says!”

The Midrash continues: Hashem then said to Mamre: “You have given Avraham good advice. I will reveal Myself to him [Avraham] only in your land, not the land of Anar or Eshkol.”

Each of the friends tried to give Avraham the right advice. So what did Mamre do differently that allowed him to come up with the right answer? Anar and Eshkol tried to put themselves into Avraham’s situation and imagine what **they** would do if they were presented with such a command from Hashem. In contrast, Mamre genuinely tried to see the situation from Avraham’s perspective, taking into account Avraham’s character traits, unique experiences and circumstances. Mamre is the only friend that gave advice that was uniquely tailored to Avraham. Mamre didn’t just think what he personally would do if he was in Avraham’s circumstances. Rather, he genuinely tried to see the world through Avraham’s eyes.

From Mamre we can learn that whenever we are asked to give advice we should try to put ourselves into the other person’s position and see the world through their eyes. Similarly, when we do an act of kindness for someone else, we need to think about what **they** would want, not what we would want if we were in their position. There is a concept known as ‘misplaced chesed’. Often we try to do a kind deed but it backfires or does not assist the other person. For example, before you buy someone a bouquet of flowers that you admire, stop to think whether the other person has hay fever. Before you pop in unannounced to visit a friend, stop to think whether they enjoy company. Perhaps they are quite introverted and would be more comfortable with a phone call.

We can actually learn this same lesson from another aspect of this story in our Parsha. After his Brit, we would expect that the elderly Avraham would need some time to recuperate. Rashi<sup>2</sup> explains that Hashem caused a heatwave so that there would be no travellers to trouble Avraham while he recuperated. However, Avraham was still keen to receive guests so that he could teach them about Hashem. He sat at the entrance to his tent, longing for travellers to appear. Therefore Hashem sent Avraham the three angels in the form of men to enable Avraham to welcome guests and perform his acts of kindness and kiruv. Most people in Avraham’s circumstances would want peace and quiet. But Avraham was different.

Of course Hashem knew from the outset what Avraham truly wanted. So why did Hashem first cause there to be a heatwave to keep guests away and then send three special visitors? Perhaps Hashem acted in this way in order to teach us this lesson. Sometimes our acts of kindness appear appropriate from an objective perspective. However we need to be sensitive to the needs of the recipient of our acts of kindness. For our acts of kindness to really hit the mark, we need to take ourselves and our egos out of the picture. We need to genuinely put ourselves into the other person’s position and ask ourselves what they would want. Otherwise, we risk our acts of chesed becoming misplaced chesed.

Let’s try something this week:

1. To be a good friend and to effectively help others we must stop focusing on ourselves and try to see the world from the perspective of other people.
2. Before we do acts of chesed, stop for a moment. Think about the other person. Would this act really make them happy? Or are we just giving the recipient what would make us happy?

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder.

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<sup>2</sup> Rashi’s commentary to Breishit 18:1, the pasuk quoted above.

## **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 parashah that usually relates 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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