

## DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

### “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Vayera  
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

### Vayera – The power of prayer and patience<sup>1</sup>

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

Hashem informs Avraham of his intention to destroy these cities which are full of wicked inhabitants. 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. The Torah then records a lengthy back and forth discussion as Avraham bargains Hashem down to 10 tzaddikim. Hashem agrees not to destroy the cities even for the sake of 10 tzaddikim. However, ultimately there are not even 10 tzaddikim. The destruction is slated to 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 and that storyline is over. 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 13<sup>th</sup> 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 letter 'Samech' or a letter 'Peh' placed at the end of the paragraph<sup>2</sup>. Hashem, not the Archbishop, divided the text in this way.

In our Parsha, it is 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, this story is not yet over...

The story continues as follows. The angels arrive in Sodom. Avraham's nephew, Lot, invites them into his home. Lot learned the good middah of hachnasat orchim<sup>3</sup> from Avraham and he also knows that the visitors will not last long on the streets of Sodom. After an eventful night, the angels save Lot, his wife and two daughters just in time before Hashem destroys Sodom and Gomorrah. However, Lot's wife defies the instructions of the angels and turns around to watch the destruction. She is punished by being turned into a pillar of salt. Avraham sees the destruction from his home on the mountain. The Torah then informs us that Hashem had remembered Avraham and that is why 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. These two babies will each become the founder of a nation – the nation of Ammon and the nation of Moab. Only now, after a very long block of text, does the paragraph finally end.

This suggests that, from the Torah's perspective, the narrative should end with the birth of Moab and Ammon. Why is this so? Let's explore.

Ruth came from the nation of Moab. As we read in Megillat Ruth<sup>4</sup>, Ruth married Boaz and became the great grandmother of David Hamelech. We also know that Na'amah came from the nation of Ammon. Na'amah married

<sup>1</sup> This week's Darchai Noam is based on an idea that I heard in a shiur by Rabbi Lawrence Keleman. The relevance of the paragraph breaks in the Torah text was explained to me by Rabbi Dov Tarkieltaub.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> Welcoming visitors into one's home (see Rashi's commentary to Breishit 19:1).

<sup>4</sup> Which is read on Shavuot.

Shlomo Hamelech and their son, Rechavam, continued the Davidic dynasty. The Davidic dynasty will ultimately give rise to the Mashiach. This means that the unsavoury incident with Lot and his daughters created the direct ancestors of the Davidic dynasty and, ultimately, will give rise to the Moshiach!

This historical knowledge may explain 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 appear to have been unsuccessful. However, in reality, his prayers were fruitful in the most amazing and unpredictable way. Avraham's prayers resulted in Lot being saved and consequently Moab and Ammon being born. This in turn planted the seed for David Hamelech to be born which will ultimately give rise to the Mashiach!

This teaches us a powerful lesson about 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, we must believe that 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. Yet they undoubtedly have an effect.

Rabbi Aryeh Levine summarises this idea beautifully. A woman had been praying for the recovery of her sick husband. Unfortunately, her husband passed away. She came to Rabbi Levine and complained that all of her tears and prayers were wasted. Rabbi Levine comforted her with the following:

*"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".<sup>5</sup>*

Hashem wants us to pray to Him for everything in our lives. For example, when Hashem created vegetation, it remained just below the surface of the earth, until Adam prayed for rain<sup>6</sup>.

By davening to Hashem and asking for His help we achieve many things, including:

- we recognise and acknowledge the only true Source of our success;
- we bring Hashem into the picture – He is the only One able to control outcomes; 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 are required. We must believe that Hashem is listening and that our prayers are never wasted, even if the situation has not changed for the better. We must feel confident that we have the ability to change things through our prayers, even if we cannot see immediate success.

We can also strive to reach a level of faith and understanding that ultimately Hashem wanted us to turn to Him and depend on Him, regardless of the issue at hand. Our connection with Hashem, our reliance on Him and our emunah is the real underlying issue.

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 receive immediate results or not, work on realising that Hashem is ultimately in charge. Our prayers are having an effect, whether we can see the results straight away or not.
3. Remember that our prayers are inherently precious and valuable as they connect us more firmly to Hashem and they demonstrate our emunah in Him. The subject matter of our prayers is at most a side issue in the face of this emunah.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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<sup>5</sup> A Tzaddik in our time, p126.

<sup>6</sup> See Parashat Breishit, chapter 2, pasuk 5 together with Rashi's commentary.