

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Vayera
October 2020 / Cheshvan 5781

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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Vayera – The effort or the outcome

This week's Parasha of Vayera includes the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. After Avraham is visited by three angels in the guise of men, Hashem informs him of His intention to destroy these cities which were full of wicked inhabitants. Avraham begs and prays for mercy on their behalf and the Torah records these prayers in great detail.

In last year's Darchai Noam for this Parasha, we discussed the outcome of Avraham's prayers. On the surface, it seems that Avraham's prayers were unsuccessful. Sodom and Gomorrah¹ were totally destroyed. However, a deeper look reveals that Avraham's prayers resulted in Lot being saved and consequently Moab and Ammon being born. From Moab and Ammon came Ruth and Na'amah who were direct ancestors of the Davidic dynasty. From David Hamelech will ultimately come the Mashiach who will bring the entire world to its perfected state. Thus, Avraham's prayers truly were fruitful in the most amazing way!²

After sending off Darchai Noam last year, that Friday night at shule I heard a very interesting talk by a visiting speaker. He also analysed Avraham's prayers and he reached the exact opposite conclusion to that discussed above! He explained that Avraham's prayers were entirely unsuccessful, and not even responsible for saving Lot! He proved this from the fact that the angel who saved Lot was already sent by Hashem before Avraham even began to pray.

In my humble opinion, there is a counter argument. In his commentary, Rashi explains that the third angel, whose job it was to save Lot, had an additional role, that is, to heal Avraham after his Brit Milah. Therefore, Hashem needed to send this angel even if Avraham had not prayed and even if the angel would not need to save Lot. In addition, we can also argue that the angel was sent by Hashem in case Avraham prayed. Had Avraham not prayed, then the angel would not have saved Lot. Finally, we could argue that Hashem is outside of time and he knew that Avraham was going to daven. Therefore, he sent the angel to save Lot in advance, even before Avraham had actually prayed.³

However, the Torah has 70 faces.⁴ There is usually more than one way to explain events in the Torah and they can all be equally valid. Certainly, on a superficial reading of the story, it does seem that Avraham was not successful in his attempts to save Sodom and Gomorrah. If this is the case, let's see what we can learn from this alternative explanation.

¹ There were additional, smaller cities that were nearby and were also destroyed together with Sodom and Gomorrah.

² To see this discussion in more detail, please see Darchai Noam for Parashat Vayera 5780 (2019). A copy can be accessed here: <http://www.darchai-noam.com/>

³ This raises a fascinating question about free will and divine foreknowledge. There is insufficient space here to delve into this issue, but if anyone would like some background information please email darchai.noam@gmail.com.

⁴ The Sages teach us there are many valid interpretations to the Torah. The Midrash (Bamidbar Rabbah 13:15) writes that there are 70 “faces” to the Torah. This means that there are many valid ways of understanding each part of the Torah — some are more literal and some are less literal — but all are valid according to the legitimate methods of Torah study that are part of our tradition.

The guest speaker at shule asked a very powerful question. The Torah spends many pasukim detailing Avraham's prayers and discussions with Hashem. Why did the Torah devote so much time describing the negotiations between Avraham and Hashem in such detail if Avraham was unsuccessful in his prayers? Why focus on his failed attempts? Why didn't the Torah just tell us that Avraham tried to argue in favour of Sodom and Gomorrah but did not succeed and then move on?

The guest speaker suggested that the Torah put so much focus on Avraham's prayers to teach us that our prayers are inherently precious to Hashem and the effort we put in to a task is more important than the outcome. Being result-focused, people often do not pay sufficient attention to the hard work invested in an endeavour. If the results are not positive then people tend to be less interested. However, this approach is problematic for a number of reasons:

- As parents, if we only focus on the outcome, we are sending the wrong message to our children. They may be encouraged to win at any cost because the end will justify the means.
- A number of psychological studies⁵ have demonstrated that people who are complimented or rewarded for their effort will tend to try harder in the future. People who are only rewarded for the results will be more likely to give up if the challenge is too hard and they don't think they can succeed.
- Ultimately (and as discussed in Darchai Noam two weeks ago – Parashat Noach), the outcome of anything is always only in Hashem's hands anyway. In all of our endeavours, there are so many factors that are outside of our control. We are only responsible for the effort we put in. Hashem decides the results.

Imagine a person who studies hard for a test and masters all of the material. Unfortunately, on the day of the test, he is feeling under the weather and he does not do well. Despite his low grade, he has succeeded in gaining a deep understanding of the subject matter, more than other people who might have scored higher. Is the mark really so important? Or is it more important that he put in the effort and can now apply his hard-earned knowledge?

Similarly, prayer is always beneficial, whether we see results or not. We do not always see a favourable response to our prayers. But whenever we pray it connects us to Hashem and strengthens our emunah. We can suggest that Hashem was very happy with the efforts that Avraham made to save Sodom and Gomorrah and as a reward he honoured Avraham by including a lengthy description of his prayers in the holy Torah.

When we are praising others (such as our children, employees or subordinates) we should make an effort to focus more on their effort rather than on the outcome. This can help to keep them motivated to keep up the good work in the future. And when we pray to Hashem, we can try to remember that our prayers are inherently rewarded, regardless of the outcome.

Let's try something this week:

1. Remember the lesson from Avraham's prayers for Sodom and Gomorrah. Hashem was very happy with Avraham's efforts, even though the result was not favourable. He rewarded Avraham with a lengthy description of his efforts in the holy Torah.
2. When praising others, try to remember to focus on the efforts that they made, rather than just focusing on the result.
3. When praying for something, remind yourself that your prayers are precious and also beneficial, whether or not you see your desired outcome.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

⁵ <http://socialpsychonline.com/2016/07/psychology-success/>