

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?

Toldot – Knowing when to fight and when to give in

In this week's Parsha of Toldot we learn about Yitzchak's life. There was a famine in the land and Yitzchak is forced to move to the city of Gerar in the land of the Plishtim. Yitzchak became very successful financially while he was living in Gerar but he was involved in a number of disputes with the locals. It is interesting to see how he reacted to these disputes.

“And Avimelech [the king of the Plishtim] said to Yitzchak: ‘Go away from us because you have become much stronger than us’. And Yitzchak went away from there and camped in the valley of Gerar [which was far away from the city of Gerar (Rashi)] and settled there.” (Breishit 26:16-17)

When Avimelech asked Yitzchak to leave the city Yitzchak packed up and left. He did not dispute the king's request.

Yitzchak then digs a number of wells. Each time he digs a well the Plishtim claim that the water belongs to them. However this time Yitzchak does not give up. He continues to dig wells until finally the Plishtim leave him alone.

“And he moved from there and he dug another well and they did not quarrel over it. And he called the well Rechovot and he said: ‘Because now Hashem has made room for us and we will be fruitful in the land.’” (Breishit 26:22).

Practically speaking, the wells were an important battle for Yitzchak because he needed a water supply. But there was much more going on here. The Ramban in his commentary to the Torah explains the deeper, mystical meaning behind these wells. The wells alluded to the future Batei Mikdash. The Ramban explains that a “well of living water” alludes to the House of Hashem that Yitzchak's children will build in the future. By digging these wells, Yitzchak was somehow strengthening our claim to the land and beginning the process of building the Bet Hamikdash. Either for practical or mystical reasons it is clear that Yitzchak believed that this was an important issue worth fighting for. He did not give in like he did when Avimelech asked him to leave the city.

We can learn from Yitzchak that sometimes it is appropriate for us to fight for our rights and sometimes it is appropriate for us to be mevater (to give in). Being able to appropriately distinguish when to give in and when to fight is intrinsically connected to our self-awareness and knowing our limits. It often takes a lot of reflection, contemplation and/or discussion.

Giving in necessitates forgiveness. To forgive someone who has wronged you is a beautiful character trait. But this only works if we can truly forgive our fellow in our heart. If we don't truly forgive then we may come to hate our fellow in our heart which is prohibited (Vayikra 19:17). Sometimes it can be very difficult to forgive. Rabbi Akiva Tatz teaches one method for us to contemplate in order to assist us to forgive in our hearts. Rabbi Tatz explains that we have to stand before Hashem on Yom Kippur and beg for forgiveness for our sins. But what if we have committed a sin that is unforgiveable? If we can tell Hashem that we have forgiven someone else, even though they did not deserve to be forgiven, then Hashem will act the same way towards us and forgive us for our sins.

Even Gedolim need to work on true forgiveness. Reuven¹ once asked Rav Shlomo Aviner² for advice. Someone had caused Reuven great harm and was now asking Reuven for forgiveness. But Reuven could not bring himself to forgive him in his heart. What should Reuven do? Rav Aviner answered by quoting an anecdote about Rav Eliyahu Lopian, a prominent leader of the mussar movement. Rav Lopian had a similar dilemma. He was asked to forgive someone for an act that he found difficult to forgive. Rav Lopian told the person that he was not able to forgive him fully at the moment but he asked him to return after 2 weeks and ask for forgiveness again. During those 2 weeks Rav Lopian put extra effort into learning mussar works in an effort to achieve complete forgiveness. Perhaps in the merit of this avodah Hashem granted Rav Lopian the ability to forgive with a full heart and the peace of mind that comes with it.

The following story shows how a great Tzaddik can walk away from a fight when he feels that it is appropriate to do so.

Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaCohen Kook was the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi under the British Mandate, before the creation of the state of Israel³. Because of Rav Kook's empathy towards the non-religious elements he had a number of opponents, some of whom were very public in their condemnation. It happened that one of these opponents was in desperate need of some assistance from the British Mandatory Government. As Chief Rabbi, Rav Kook had a lot of influence with the British High Commissioner and a letter from Rav Kook was often all that was needed. This particular opponent needed a letter from Rav Kook but he was embarrassed to appear in person because he had been a very harsh critic of the Rav. So he sent a messenger instead. Rav Kook was happy to assist and he wrote the letter and gave it to messenger. As the messenger was about to leave, Rav Kook called him back and asked to see the letter. He read the letter again carefully and then returned it to the messenger and sent him on his way. This was unusual behaviour on the part of Rav Kook and his attendant asked him why he acted that way. Rav Kook explained that he was concerned that there might be a hint of resentment in his heart which might have been reflected in the letter. He wanted to read the letter once again just to make sure that it was written with a full heart.

Most of us are not at the level of Rav Kook. For us to act in such a manner would be inauthentic and inadvisable. However, we need to be aware of when it is really appropriate to fight for our rights and when it would be better to be mevater. Here's a hint. If we justify getting into a fight by saying: "It's the principle of the matter!" then what we probably mean is: "My ego won't let me walk away from this".

Let's try something this week:

1. Before pursuing a dispute, contemplate carefully whether this is a "biggie" or a "littie" for us personally. Could we walk away without resentment? We need to know where our limits lie and to predict how we are likely to feel if we give in.
2. If we do decide to walk away from a dispute, in order to maximise our chances of forgiving the other party in our hearts, we can read mussar works such as "Forgiveness" by Rabbi Twerski and practice their advice.
3. Remember Rabbi Tatz's advice – if we want Hashem to forgive us for our sins, we need to work hard to forgive others for their sins, even the so-called unforgiveable sins.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

¹ Not his real name.

² Rosh Yeshiva of Ateret Yerushalayim Yeshiva

³ This story was published in "An Angel Among Men" by Simcha Raz.

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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