

DARCHAI NOAM

Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם

(Mishlei 3:17)

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darchai.noam@gmail.com

How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Toldot – Everyone has their role in life

This week's Parsha of Toldot contains Yitzchak's relatively brief story. In comparison to the other two Avot - his father Avraham and his son Yaakov, the Torah doesn't devote a lot of space focusing on Yitzchak.

From Parshat Lech Lecha, there are three Parshiyot jam-packed full of Avraham's experiences and adventures. Yaakov's story starts in this week's Parsha and he is a dominant character for most of the remainder of Sefer Breishit. In contrast, Yitzchak's adventures are concentrated in the middle of this week's Parsha, in chapter 26. Even the second half of our Parsha is already focused on Yaakov and how he manages to receive the Brachot instead of Esav. Even though Yitzchak is the one that bestows the Brachot, he is old and blind. Yaakov, Esav and Rivkah are the dominant players in this story.

In the very brief account of Yitzchak's life, he doesn't seem to achieve much of note. Most of his actions merely follow in the footsteps of his father Avraham. Like Avraham, he is forced to travel due to a famine in the land¹. He settles in the land of Gerar where Avraham had dwelled. He copies Avraham's ruse of pretending that his wife is his sister to deter the immoral locals from killing him and taking his wife. He re-digs the same wells that Avraham dug and calls them by the same names.

And Yitzchak dug again the wells of water which they had dug in the days of Avraham his father; and the Philistim had filled them up after the death of Avraham; and he called them [the wells] by the same names that his father had called them.
(Breishit 26:15)

Practically speaking, the wells were important because Yitzchak needed a water supply. But there was actually much more going on here. The Ramban in his commentary to the Torah explains the deeper, mystical meaning behind these wells². However, whichever way we look at it, whether from a practical perspective or a mystical perspective, Yitzchak just seems to be re-doing the work that Avraham did.

And finally, Yitzchak reaffirms the treaty with Avimelech, king of the Plishtim. A treaty which Avraham had already made.

Avraham is known as the father of ethical monotheism. He passed 10 difficult tests and he was a trailblazer, teaching the world about Hashem. Yaakov fathered the 12 tribes and began building the Jewish nation. In our prayers and in the Gemara we often recall Avraham in his own merit and we often mention Yaakov as the father of the Jewish people. Yitzchak usually only gets a mention when we recall the three Avot – Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov.

¹ Breishit 26:1.

² 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.

However, even though Yitzchak did not appear to overtly accomplish as much as Avraham and Yaakov did, and even though there are far less pasukim dedicated to him in the Torah, there is no question that he was a remarkable man. He was one of the greatest people that ever lived! The story of Akeidat Yitzchak focuses on the role of Avraham and the fact that this was one of Avraham's ten tests. However we need to remember that Yitzchak was willing to be sacrificed as a 37 year old! He even suggested to his elderly father that he be bound so that he not inadvertently flinch or cause himself to become blemished in the struggle. Yitzchak was able to consolidate his father's teachings and way of life and act as the conduit to pass them on to future generations.

We can learn from Yitzchak that everyone has a role to play in life. The importance of that role cannot be judged by how much overt attention is focused on the person or how much honour they receive. Hashem put each of us into the world for a reason. We each have a unique role to play and that role is important, regardless of how much honour or attention we receive or how much value Western society attributes to that role. We need to find out what our role is (which is not so easy to do!) and appreciate it rather than worrying about other people's roles. If we concentrate on fulfilling our unique potential, we can avoid judging our own or other people's honour and respect everyone equally.

The story is told of Rabbi Isser Zalman Meltzer who was sitting with a group of his students in his home.³ One of the students looked out of the window and announced that a leading Torah scholar was walking towards the house. In honour of the esteemed guest, Rabbi Meltzer quickly prepared his modest Jerusalem apartment. He replaced the tablecloth, laid out special food and changed into his Shabbat clothes. When there was finally a knock at the door Reb Isser Zalman rushed to the door to welcome the scholar. However, the visitor was not the leading Torah scholar that they had expected. Instead, a simple beggar stood there asking for a letter of recommendation to help him raise funds. To the visitor's surprise, Rabbi Meltzer ushered him into his dining room, seated him at the head of the table, fed him, spoke with him and gave him the same treatment that he would have given a revered guest. After the old Jew had left, Rabbi Meltzer commented to his students, "How can we ever know how to evaluate the value of people? This is the way one must treat every Jew. I was happy to channel my enthusiastic expectations of a great Rabbi's visit toward this simple Jew."

Let's try something this week:

1. Be careful not to judge anyone else's role or talents or compare them to our own.
2. Remember that we have our own unique role to play. Hashem put us into this world for a special purpose that no-one else can fulfil. That knowledge should make us feel proud and happy.
3. Remember that we are 'Am Echad' and each of us plays a crucial part in the success and destiny of the Jewish people. As such, we are all equally special and important and we are all created in the image of Hashem!

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Ledder.

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³ Seen in "Parsha Parables" by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky.

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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