

## DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

### “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Toldot, December 2016

[darchai.noam@gmail.com](mailto:darchai.noam@gmail.com)

How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

### Toldot – How important is the truth?

In this week's Parsha of Toldot we learn about the famous incident of Yaakov 'stealing' Yitzchak's bracha from his brother Eisav. On the advice of his mother Rivkah, Yaakov obtained the bracha by deception by pretending to be Eisav. There are many ways to understand this enigmatic event, but this week we will focus on the importance of emet (truth) in Judaism.

Yaakov was known as an 'Ish Tam', a wholesome man<sup>1</sup>. Rashi explains this to mean that Yaakov was a man of truth. This middah contrasted with his brother Eisav's typical behaviour. Hashem designs everyone's tests specifically in the area where they need to be tested. For instance, Avraham was a man of chesed and was tested in the area of gevurah (e.g. at the Akeidat Yitzchak). So Yaakov, the man of truth, was tested in the area of deception.

Naturally, Yaakov was uncomfortable with the idea of practicing deception. For instance, when Yaakov discusses the plan with Rivkah, he expresses his concern that Yitzchak might feel his smooth skin, realise that he was not hairy like Eisav, and think badly of him:

*“Perhaps (Ulay) my father will feel me and I will be appear to him like a deceiver and I will bring upon myself a curse rather than a blessing.”* (Breishit 27:12)

There are two ways to say 'perhaps' in Hebrew – 'ulay' and 'pen'. 'Pen' is used to refer to a potential event that one wishes will not happen. For example: “Perhaps we will be late and we will miss out on the exciting event”. In contrast, 'ulay' is used to refer to an event that one desires will occur. For example, “Perhaps the exciting performance will start late and we won't miss the beginning!” By using the word 'ulay', it suggests that deep down Yaakov is hoping to be caught out so that he will not have to continue with the plan of deceiving his father.

When Yitzchak asks Yaakov to identify himself, He replies: “It is I, Eisav your firstborn”. Rashi explains that Yaakov meant: “It is I [who brought you your meal, but] Eisav [is] your firstborn”. The Ibn Ezra suggests that Yaakov said “I” under his breath and then “Eisav your firstborn” out loud. Rather than simple word games, Yaakov was doing his best to be as honest as possible under the circumstances.

There are some cases where it is halachically permitted to bend the truth. One source of this is in last week's Parsha of Vayera. Sarah overheard the three visitors tell Avraham that they would have a son:

*“And Sarah laughed to herself, saying ‘After I have withered shall I again have delicate skin? And **my husband** is old!’”* (Breishit 18:12).

However, when Hashem reports Sarah's response to Avraham, He changes Sarah's words slightly:

*“Then Hashem said to Avraham, ‘Why is it that Sarah laughed, saying ‘Shall I in truth bear a child, though I have become old?’”* (Breishit 18:13).

Though in truth Sarah had referred to her husband Avraham as old, Hashem told Avraham that Sarah referred to herself as old. Rashi explains that Hashem altered the report of Sarah's words for the sake

<sup>1</sup> Breishit 25:27.

of peace. This is supported by the Gemara<sup>2</sup> which states that peace is so precious that even Hashem Himself was willing to bend the truth to preserve peace between husband and wife.

The Ramban's commentary on this verse reveals how Hashem minimised the inaccuracy of His words as much as possible even while upholding Shalom Bayit. When Hashem reported the words "I have become old", the Ramban explains that He was actually paraphrasing the first half of Sarah's statement (i.e. "I have withered"). However, for the sake of peace, Hashem simply omitted Sarah's statement about Avraham's age. Therefore, the Ramban concludes, Hashem's words were actually truthful. This teaches us that even when it is permissible to bend the truth, such deception should be minimised as much as possible.

The Torah commands us as follows: "distance yourself from falsehood"<sup>3</sup>. This is the only sin where the Torah commands us to 'distance' ourselves. David HaMelech said in Tehillim: "He who practices deceit, who speaks lies, will not stand before My [Hashem's] eyes".<sup>4</sup>

When we tell the truth we are emulating Hashem Himself, about Whom it is said "The seal of G-d is truth"<sup>5</sup>. On the other hand, the Arizal says that the seal of the Yetzer Hara is falsehood. The Hebrew word for truth is emet (aleph, mem, tav). It contains the first, middle and last letters of the aleph bet. This is because truth is all encompassing and provides the broadest possible perspective. The Hebrew word for lie is sheker (shin, kuf, resh). These three letters are bunched together at the end of the aleph bet. This is because falsehood is a very narrow, subjective view of reality.

We should avoid lying whenever possible. There are some cases where it is permissible and sometimes even appropriate to bend the truth. As well as for the sake of peace, it is also permitted to lie in order to practice humility, for the sake of modesty and to protect someone from harm.<sup>6</sup> However, in order to distance ourselves from falsehood as much as possible, we should put in the effort to minimise the technical distortions. In circumstances where inaccuracies are necessary, we should try our best to say a half-truth instead of an outright lie whenever possible. In doing so we are emulating Yaakov Avinu and showing Hashem how reluctant we are to veer from the path of emet.

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to emulate Yaakov, the man of truth, and strive to ensure that our words are as accurate and honest as possible.
2. Consult with a Rav if in doubt as to whether in a particular situation the Torah requires us to stick to the truth or to bend the truth.
3. In circumstances where we feel that we are forced to bend the truth, we should try to minimise as much as possible the extent of any deception or dishonesty by making the effort to ensure that our words are as close as possible to the truth.

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Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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<sup>2</sup> Baba Metzia 87a.

<sup>3</sup> Shmot 23:7.

<sup>4</sup> Tehillim 101:7.

<sup>5</sup> Gemara, Shabbat 55a.

<sup>6</sup> Gemara, Baba Metzia 23b.

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## **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 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're'echa kamocho' – loving one's fellow as oneself.

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