

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Toldot, November 2017

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Toldot – the lesser of two evils

In this week's Parsha of Toldot we read about the time that Yitzchak and Rivka spent living in Gerar. Yitzchak was concerned that the men of that place would kill him in order to take his wife Rivkah. He therefore pretended that Rivkah was his sister.¹

Yitzchak adopted the same ruse that his father Avraham had used. On two separate occasions (once in Egypt and once in Gerar), Avraham had told the local population that Sarah was his sister because he feared that the men would kill him in order to take her.² The Ramban suggests that these were not just isolated incidents and that Avraham and Sarah would adopt this ruse often.³

This whole idea seems strange. Avraham and Yitzchak understood that the local men would not hesitate to commit murder to get what they want. If that is the case, then why would these men hesitate to commit the lesser sin of adultery? Why wouldn't they just leave the husband alive and forcibly take the wife?

The Chanukat Habayit⁴ suggests that a one-off crime was easier to justify. It was as if the Egyptians and the inhabitants of Gerar could just hold their breath and perform an act of murder. The wife would then become permitted to them. However, to perform repeated acts of adultery while the husband was alive would be too difficult to rationalise. Each act would be another sin. The wicked inhabitants wanted Sarah and Rivkah for themselves, but they wanted to minimise the extent of their sin.

Rabbi Ozer Alport quotes the Midrash Pliah which draws an analogy between these incidents and the halacha relating to slaughtering an animal on Shabbat for a sick person. The case is that we have a sick person in a life threatening situation who needs to eat meat on Shabbat. There is a choice between eating non-kosher meat which is readily available or breaking Shabbat to shecht an animal and cook kosher meat. One can (and indeed must) break the halacha if it is necessary to do so in order to save a life.⁵ However which halacha is it preferable to break – eating non-kosher meat or breaking Shabbat?

Eating non-kosher food is violating a Torah prohibition. Shechting an animal and cooking meat on Shabbat are also both Torah prohibitions and they are more serious than the prohibition of eating non-kosher meat.⁶ Therefore it would seem that it is preferable to break the less serious sin of eating non-kosher meat.

However, the halacha is that it is preferable to shecht the animal and cook the kosher meat on Shabbat.⁷ (It is important to point out that this entire discussion is only relevant if time is not of the essence. If the sick person cannot wait for the animal to be shechted and for the meat to be cooked, then of course one must feed the sick person immediately with whatever food is available, regardless of its kashrut status.)

¹ Breishit 26:6-11.

² See Parshat Lech Lecha (Breishit 12:10-20) and Parshat Vayera (Breishit, Chapter 20)

³ See Ramban's commentary to Parshat Lech Lecha, Breishit 12:11-13.

⁴ By Rav Avraham Yehoshua Heschel (1888-1967) as quoted by Rabbi Ozer Alport:

<http://www.aish.com/tp/i/pp/132878893.html>

⁵ The exception is idolatry, immorality and murder – one must not break these prohibitions even at the cost of their life.

⁶ We know that breaking Shabbat is more serious because the punishment for breaking Shabbat is worse than the punishment for eating non-kosher meat.

⁷ Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 328:14.

A number of reasons are given for this halacha. According to the Ran⁸ even though the sin of eating non-kosher meat is a less serious violation than breaking Shabbat, it is ultimately worse because doing so would cause one to be liable for many sins. Each additional olive-sized piece of meat that is consumed would constitute another sin. In contrast, slaughtering the animal and cooking the meat are only two prohibitions. The Ran argues that it is better to perform two more serious violations of the Torah than numerous less serious violations.

The underlying logic of the Ran is similar to the logic of the wicked men of Egypt and Gerar. They would rather perform a more serious sin (murder) once than to repeatedly perform a less serious sin (adultery).

However, the two cases can be distinguished on at least two bases.

First, in the case of the sick person on Shabbat, we are choosing between two sins against Hashem (ben Adam l'makom). No-one is being hurt by our sin. In the case of our Parsha we are dealing with sins against our fellow man (ben Adam l'chavero). These sins involve hurting other people.

Second, in the case of the sick person on Shabbat, we do not have a choice and we are obligated to violate a prohibition in order to save a life – either the prohibition of eating non-kosher food or the prohibition of slaughtering and cooking on Shabbat. In the case of our Parsha, the wicked men are choosing to sin and are merely trying to work out which sin is less serious. They could have chosen not to sin at all.

Despite these important distinctions, the men of Gerar and Egypt sought to rely on this logic to justify their heinous behaviour. Avraham was well aware of this tendency towards a distorted way of thinking. When the king of Gerar discovered the truth that Sarah was in reality Avraham's wife, he asked Avraham why he had distorted the truth. Avraham replied:

“Because I said there is no fear of G-d in this place”⁹

Avraham understood that a lack of fear of Hashem leads to anarchy. Left to their own devices, human beings are excellent at rationalising any form of behaviour that allows them to satisfy their desires. They might claim to be acting morally, but in reality they are only serving themselves. The perverse logic of the inhabitants of Gerar and Egypt is an extreme case, but it demonstrates the danger of having 'no fear of G-d in this place'.

The Hebrew word 'Bliya'al'¹⁰ refers to a base, low-life person, a 'no-goodnik', a trouble-maker. The same letters of this word also spell 'Bli Ol' which means 'without a yoke'.¹¹ It refers to someone who has not accepted upon themselves the yoke of Heaven. One of the intentions that we should have in mind when we recite the Shema every day is that we consciously accept upon ourselves the yoke of Heaven. As Avraham understood, if someone does not accept the yoke of Heaven, and they live without fear of Hashem, they are likely to be a problematic person. The word 'Bliya'al' is the perfect word to describe such a person.

Atheists like to claim that people can behave morally even without belief in the Creator. However, as we learn from our Avot's justified precautions, a lack of fear of Hashem leads to trouble and sin. The only way to guarantee moral behaviour is to have an objective source of morality that is free of human intervention and the risk of distortions. The Torah is the only objective source of morality and we have been gifted with it! Unlike the inhabitants of Egypt and Gerar, we can turn to Hashem's words through His Torah as interpreted by the Rabbanim for guidance on how to act in every circumstance.

Let's try something this week:

1. When deciding how to act in any situation, don't rely only on our own assessment. Turn to Hashem's Torah and the Rabbanim for guidance to work out how Hashem wants us to act.
2. Try to notice when you rationalise improper behaviour. We are all guilty of this at our own level. We just need to be sensitive to it.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

⁸ Rabbi Nissim of Gerona (1320-1376)

⁹ Parashat Vayera, Breishit 20:11.

¹⁰ This word appears throughout the Tanach and the Gemara. See for example Devarim 13:14.

¹¹ Thank you to my brother Oren for sharing this insight with me.

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The pasuk 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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