

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Toldot
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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Toldot – belittling the birthright

In this week's Parsha of Toldot, we read about Eisav selling the birthright to his younger brother Yaakov. As the oldest son, Eisav was halachically entitled to the right of the first born. However, he agreed to sell this right to Yaakov in return for a bowl of lentil stew.

On the day that Avraham passed away, Yaakov was busy cooking some lentils for his father Yitzchak, because that is a traditional food that is served to mourners.¹ Eisav on the other hand, chose this day to reveal his true nature. He was out in the fields committing murder.² Eisav returned home, exhausted from his new-found pastime and asked Yaakov for some of the dish that was bubbling away on the stove. Yaakov used this as an opportunity to buy the birthright from his less-deserving brother. Rashi³ explains Yaakov's reasoning. In those days, the first born inherited the right to offer the family's korbanot. Yaakov understood that the wicked Eisav was not worthy to offer korbanot to Hashem. This shows that Yaakov's underlying motivations were pure, that he wanted to take over the right of the first born out of respect for Hashem.

Eisav agreed to this trade, swearing as such to Yaakov. Yaakov gave Eisav some bread and the lentil stew and the deal was done. The Torah then describes what Eisav did next as follows:

“...and he ate and he drank and he got up and he left and Eisav (ויבר) belittled the birthright”
(Breishit 25:34)

We see that Eisav is a man of action, a man of physicality. The Pasuk describes Eisav's actions in purely physical terms. There is no deep thought, no reflection. But then the pasuk ends by stating that Eisav belittled the birthright. The word ויבר means to belittle, to disparage, to be disgusted by, or to treat as contemptible. What does this mean, that Eisav 'belittled' the birthright? One explanation could be that Eisav devalued the importance of the birthright as demonstrated by the fact that he was willing to swap it for something as valueless and temporary as a bowl of stew. However, why would the Torah need to tell us that such behaviour is belittling the birthright? It's obvious! In addition, if this explanation were correct, it would have made more sense for this phrase to be placed a few pasukim earlier, when the Torah recorded that Eisav made the deal. Instead we are told that Eisav ate, drank, got up and left and then he belittled the birthright. This order suggests that Eisav actively did something to disparage the birthright after he left at the end of this episode.

Some commentators have suggested that Eisav recognised that he had just lost something very precious, and this made him feel very uncomfortable. Therefore, he actively belittled the birthright because that would make him feel less uncomfortable about what he did. If he saw the birthright as small and unimportant then his decision to throw it all away would be much less painful for him to bear. This underlying reason may actually have been subconscious, below the surface of his awareness⁴.

¹ See Rashi to Breishit 25:29.

² Ibid.

³ Commentary to Breishit 25:31, based on the Midrash Breishit Rabba 63:13.

⁴ This is the psychological principle known as cognitive dissonance. That is, Eisav's actions were inconsistent with his beliefs. If one is in such a position, there is a tension which can only be relieved by changing one's actions or changing one's beliefs. It was too late for Eisav to change his actions, so there was a sub-conscious pressure for him to change his beliefs.

The word “ויבז” appears only twice in the entire Tanach. Once in our Parsha and again in Megillat Esther. Interestingly, this second time in Megillat Esther, the word is used in relation to the wicked Haman who was one of Eisav’s descendants.⁵ The word, ויבז, appears when Haman had just been promoted by King Achashverosh and everyone in the entire kingdom (except Mordechai) was bowing down to him. When Haman saw that Mordechai was not bowing down before him he became angry. Megillat Esther states:

“And [Haman] belittled (ויבז) the idea of laying his hands on Mordechai alone for they had disclosed to [Haman] Mordechai’s nationality, and Haman sought to destroy all of the Jews who were throughout Achasheverosh’s entire kingdom, Mordechai’s people.”
(Esther 3:6)

Let’s try to understand what was going on in Haman’s mind. He was very angry at Mordechai for not showing him the honour which he believed he deserved. However, to kill Mordechai alone would be degrading to Haman in his own, and others’ eyes. It would show that Haman cared so much about what one individual Jew did and thought. Haman wanted people to see that it was beneath him to go to the trouble and effort of getting angry with Mordechai. So therefore, Haman tried to downplay the importance of Mordechai in his mind. But in reality, he was deeply affected by Mordechai’s behaviour. Every time that he saw Mordechai he felt inadequate. So instead of denting his pride and dealing with Mordechai directly, he devised a plot to wipe out Mordechai’s entire people! (As you do.) He was acting irrationally to keep his pride and self-image intact.

We see that Eisav’s behaviour was similar to Haman’s behaviour. Eisav had let his lower soul and animalistic drives dominate when he sold his birthright to satiate his hunger. Once satiated, he must have experienced some regret and then discomfort at the error of his ways. In an effort to minimise his discomfort, he tried to change his beliefs about the value of the birthright in the first place by belittling it. Just like Haman, he was acting irrationally to keep his pride and self-image intact.

What can we learn from this message? We often make choices in life that are irrational and driven by our taiva (desires) and gaiva (pride). When our rational side kicks in we recognise the error. However, often we refuse to change. Or perhaps our pride does not allow us to change. Rav Moshe Weinberger⁶ discusses people who are involved in arguments and become angry. He points out that often they will say things that make no sense whatsoever, yet they will irrationally refuse to back down. Their anger led them to make irrational choices and their pride prevents them from doing teshuva. Instead they seek to ‘belittle’ the truth. They know deep down that they are talking nonsense, but their pride often prevents them from changing their behaviour and behaving honestly. Instead, they change their beliefs in an effort to support their erroneous choices.

Let’s try something this week:

1. When we make erroneous choices, we can pause and examine how it makes us feel. Then, instead of acting irrationally to comfort ourselves we can strive to do teshuva and acknowledge the error of our ways.
2. Try to examine our behaviour and our words from a more objective perspective. Is what we are saying and doing sensible? Or are we just acting the way that we do because we are locked into a way of thinking due to our pride or our underlying beliefs.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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⁵ Haman was a descendant of Eisav, through Eisav’s grandson Amalek. The Midrash (Esther Rabbah 7:10) points out that Eisav and Haman both acted in this manner of בזוי (disparaging). As the saying goes: “like [great great grand] father like son”.

⁶ This idea was heard in Rav Weinberger’s series of shiurim on Hachsharat Avreichim, which are available for download at <https://www.yutorah.org/>

About Darchai Noam

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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, usually 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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