

## DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

### “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Toldot  
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

### Toldot – Yaakov and Eisav in the Purim story

In his week's Parsha of Toldot, we read about the rivalry between Yaakov and Eisav and Yaakov's deception in order to receive the brachot.

In Darchai Noam two years ago (5779/2018) we pointed out a connection between the story of Yaakov and Eisav and Megillat Esther.<sup>1</sup> To review, at the beginning of the Parasha, Yaakov is busy cooking lentils for his father Yitzchak because that is a traditional food served to mourners<sup>2</sup>. Eisav returned home, starving and exhausted from a day of committing murder and other horrific sins. He asked Yaakov for some of the lentils. Yaakov used this as an opportunity to buy the birthright from his less-deserving brother, trading the birthright for the bowl of stew. The Torah describes Eisav's action as follows:

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

The word ויבד means to belittle or disparage. Some commentators have suggested that on some level 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.<sup>3</sup>

As we discussed, the word “ויבד” appears only twice in the entire Tanach. The second time is in Megillat Esther, in relation to the wicked Haman who was one of Eisav's descendants.<sup>4</sup> Haman had just been promoted by King Achashverosh and everyone was bowing down to him except Mordechai. This made Haman angry:

*“And [Haman] belittled (ויבד) 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 Achashverosh's entire kingdom, Mordechai's people.” (Esther 3:6)*

Haman was acting in the same manner as Eisav. He was very angry at Mordechai. However, to kill Mordechai alone would be beneath his dignity, because it would show that Haman cared about what one individual Jew did and thought. 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.

<sup>1</sup> The following is a high-level summary of our discussion in Darchai Noam Parashat Toldot 5779. The complete article is available here: <http://darchai-noam.com/toldot-5779-belittling-the-birthright/>.

<sup>2</sup> This event took place on the day that Avraham passed away.

<sup>3</sup> See the complete article for a more fulsome explanation of how this can be seen in the pasukim and the discussion of the psychological principle of cognitive dissonance.

<sup>4</sup> 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”.

Remarkably, we see another parallel between our Parasha and Megillat Esther. There is another phrase that appears only twice in the Tanach – once in our Parasha and once in Megillat Esther.

- In our Parasha, this phrase appears in the next instalment of the Yaakov/Eisav rivalry. When Yaakov successfully receives the brachot from Yitzchak, he slips out of the door just as Eisav was entering, ostensibly to receive the very brachot that were just given to Yaakov. When Eisav finds out what happened he lets out a *very loud and bitter cry* (ויצעקו צעקה גדלה ומרה).<sup>5</sup>
- Many years later, a descendant of Yaakov (i.e. Mordechai) lets out a *very loud and bitter cry* due to the actions of a descendant of Eisav (i.e. Haman) (ויצעקו זעקה גדלה ומרה).<sup>6</sup>

The Midrash<sup>7</sup> explains that because Yaakov caused Eisav to cry out, Mordechai ended up having to cry out as well. The battle between Yaakov and Eisav is being played out again many years later between their descendants.

This Midrash seems problematic. We assume that Yaakov was in the right in this story. Eisav was the wicked one – the one who was undeserving of the brachot. Why did Yaakov (or his descendants) deserve to be punished? The Netziv<sup>8</sup> explains that even though Yaakov was acting correctly, he was using deception. Under the circumstances, Yaakov had no choice but to rely on this ploy. Sometimes the end justifies the means. However, one needs to be extremely careful. The Netziv writes that if we are forced to do something that would otherwise be inappropriate, but with pure intentions, we must be careful not to gain any personal benefit.<sup>9</sup> When Eisav cried out, Yaakov felt a tinge of satisfaction. Therefore, middah k'neged middah (measure for measure) he was punished many years later through his descendants.

This Netziv teaches us how careful we need to be when employing a negative middah such as deception even when doing what we believe is right and what the Torah wants. We must examine our motivations very closely to make sure they are pure. If we are genuinely in the right, it is easy to overlook our own personal biases and not be completely honest with ourselves. It requires hard work and a lot of quiet contemplation to work out our underlying prejudices and motivations. This process may often require the perspective of someone a bit more objective, such as a Rav, a mentor or a trusted friend.

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to be more in touch with our underlying motivations before we act. This can be as simple as pausing for a moment and asking ourselves the question: 'why am I doing this?'
2. Seek counsel from someone more objective before employing a negative middah such as deception for the sake of a justifiable result.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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<sup>5</sup> Our Parasha, Breishit 27:34.

<sup>6</sup> Esther 4:1. In fact there is a slight difference in the two phrases. In our Parasha, the word cry (צעקה) is spelled with the letter צ where in Megillat Esther it is spelled with the letter ט. Many commentators (Rashi, Ramban and the Zohar) say that the two words are exactly the same. Some commentators claim that there is a subtle difference in meaning between the two versions of the word.

<sup>7</sup> Midrash Rabbah.

<sup>8</sup> Rav Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin (1816–1893), Rosh Yeshiva of the Volozhin Yeshiva.

<sup>9</sup> This would be relevant in the cases where one is halachically allowed to “bend the truth” for the sake of peace. This is *not* a blanket permission to lie when it suits you! One can only bend the truth in limited circumstances and one must be careful not to do so for personal benefit. Halachik guidance from an Orthodox Rabbi is of course necessary.