

## DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

### “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Sh'lach, July 2016

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

### Sh'lach – finding the kernel of goodness

In this week's Parsha of Sh'lach we read about the tragedy of the spies who gave a negative report about Eretz Yisrael causing Bnei Yisrael to become discouraged and lose faith. As a result, Bnei Yisrael were not allowed to enter the land straight away, but would have to wander in the wilderness for 40 years. Only the next generation would have the merit of entering the land.

On examining the report that the spies brought back, we see that they started with a positive description of Eretz Yisrael but they quickly degenerated into negativity:

*“We arrived at the land to which you sent us, and indeed it flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. But... the people that dwells in the land are very strong, the cities are very fortified and large and we also saw the children of giants there”* (Bamidbar 13:27-28)

Rashi explains<sup>1</sup> that their positive beginning was a deliberate and cunning ploy by the spies to convince the people to believe them. They understood that a lie can only be maintained if it contains at least some element of truth. By adding in a kernel of truth to their falsehood, they sought to maximise the chance that their evil report would be accepted. That is one of the tricks of the Yetzer Hara. It uses a bit of truth to convince us and then, once we have bought in, it feeds us falsehood.

The punishment of wandering in the wilderness for 40 years was calculated based on the number of days that the spies had spied out the land:

*“According to the number of days that you spied the Land, forty days, a day for each year, you will bear your sin for forty years...”* (Bamidbar 14:34)

However, if their sin lay in their negative report, what were they doing wrong for the 40 days that they were touring the Land? The answer is that they were actually sinning all through their pilot trip by viewing the Land through negative lenses. For example, Hashem had arranged for many of the inhabitants to die during the 40 day mission. This was actually for the spies' own good – it would ensure that the inhabitants would be distracted by burials and mourning and would not notice, or attack the spies<sup>2</sup>. However, the spies chose to interpret this phenomenon as meaning that Eretz Yisrael was “a land that devours its inhabitants”. Whatever they witnessed during their tour could have been interpreted positively or negatively. They chose to interpret each event negatively.

The third paragraph of the Shema also appears in this week's Parsha. We read about the mitzvah of tzitzit:

*“You shall see it [the tzitzit] and you shall remember all of Hashem's mitzvot and perform them; and you shall not spy after your hearts and after your eyes after which you stray.”* (Bamidbar 15:39)

<sup>1</sup> Based on the Gemara, Sotah 35a.

<sup>2</sup> See Rashi to 13:32.

The mitzvah of tzitzit is supposed to remind us to keep Hashem's commandments<sup>3</sup> and to ensure that we don't stray after our hearts and our eyes. The pasuk says that we shall not **spy** after our hearts and eyes. This is an obvious reference to the sin of the spies. The Hebrew word for "spy" that is used in this passage describing the mitzvah of tzitzit is "taturu". This is the same verb that is used to describe what the spies did in the land!<sup>4</sup> We see that the spies were guilty of straying after their hearts and their eyes and the mitzvah of tzitzit appears to be a rectification for that sin. Instead of straying after our hearts and our eyes, we should look at our tzitzit (and other items of holiness) which remind us not to 'spy' but to use our eyes appropriately.

However, the order of the pasuk here is interesting. Rashi brings the Midrash that says "the eye sees, the heart desires and the body commits the sin". This suggests that the eye comes before the heart. However, this pasuk warns us not to stray after our "**hearts** and **eyes**". Why does the pasuk mention the heart before the eye? Perhaps the pasuk is teaching us that the root of the problem of straying commences in the heart. We see things in accordance with the way that our heart desires. If we want to see the positive, that is how we will interpret what we see. But if, in our hearts, we are focusing on the negative, then our eyes will see only the negative. Perhaps that is the root of the spies' sin and an important lesson of the tzitzit.

We see the same concept brought in Pirkei Avot<sup>5</sup>. Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai asked his disciples which is the best character trait that a person should have. Rabbi Eliezer suggested "a good eye". Rabbi Elazar ben Arach said "a good heart". Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai preferred the words of Rabbi Elazar ben Arach because the suggestions of the other disciples were included in this answer. If someone has a good heart they will automatically have a good eye.

Earlier we discussed Rashi's comment that people can be persuaded to believe falsehood if there is a kernel of truth embedded in it<sup>6</sup>. We can turn this idea around to the positive. If we are presented with a negative or bad report, there must also be a kernel of truth or goodness buried in there somewhere.<sup>7</sup> It is up to us to unearth it. How do we find that kernel of goodness? We need to have a "good eye" to discern the goodness. And in order to have a "good eye" we need to have the desire to see the good. Our eyes are governed by the desires in our hearts. If we **want** to find the good in things then with Hashem's help we will see the good. It all starts with having a "good heart".

Let's try something this week:

1. When we see someone that appears to have negative character traits, we can strive to focus on their undeniable good traits. We can work hard to unearth the positive side to this person and try to focus on seeing the good.
2. If we find ourselves experiencing a difficult time, we can similarly remind ourselves to empower our eyes to see the good in the situation. Even if we currently only notice the negative side, we can be sure that there is something positive because everything that Hashem does is for the best. If we try hard enough, Hashem may enable us to see the positive aspect of our circumstances. Otherwise we can rely on our emuna to believe that it is there.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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<sup>3</sup> It's interesting to note that the mitzvah of tzitzit involves tying knots in string as a memory aide. This may be the source of the well-known custom to tie a knot in ones handkerchief to remind them of something.

<sup>4</sup> See the second pasuk of the Parsha – Bamidbar 13:2.

<sup>5</sup> Pirkei Avot 2:13.

<sup>6</sup> This concept is based on a very deep mystical idea. The kabbalists teach us that there are sparks of divine holiness that have descended into the physical world. They are hidden within the physical world but they also enliven the world. Our job is to find those sparks of holiness within the negativity and to release them.

<sup>7</sup> Based on an idea heard from Rabbi Yaakov Labinsky.

Note: as the majority of our readers are located outside of Eretz Yisrael we will be following the calendar of Parshiyot for Chutz L'Aretz.

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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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