

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Sh'lach – remember to respect your elders

The momentum has been building up since the beginning of Sefer Bamidbar. Bnei Yisrael have been travelling towards the Holy Land and they have almost arrived at their destination. However their journey is interrupted by the tragic events of this week's Parsha of Sh'lach. Bnei Yisrael insist on sending spies into the land. The negative report of the spies causes a 40 year delay in their arrival time. Of the 12 spies, only two come back with a positive report – Yehoshua and Calev.

There is a grammatical irregularity in the description of the spies' journey:

“They ascended in the south and he arrived at Chevron...” (Bamidbar 13:22)

In commenting on the switch from plural to singular, Rashi explains that only Calev went to Chevron¹. Separating from the rest of the group, he visited the tomb of the Patriarchs at the Cave of Machpelah. He intended to pray for Divine assistance to resist the pressure of the 10 evil spies to join in their conspiracy. Calev sought to tap in to the merit of the forefathers and he realised that Chevron was an appropriate place for his prayers to ascend to Hashem.

Calev's actions reveal the benefit of looking back to earlier generations for guidance. Calev's current generation thought that they knew better than Hashem what was in their best interests! They were going off the track and their emunah was not strong. Calev understood that the Avot were pillars of faith and their bitachon was unswerving in the face of temptation and pressure. If Calev could emulate them, he would have a much greater chance of staying on track.

The Torah strongly encourages us to honour and respect our elders. As well as the requirement to stand in the presence of our elders,² and to respect our parents, the Torah specifically encourages us to turn to our fathers for advice and guidance:

“Remember the days of old, consider the years of ages past; ask your father, he will inform you, your elders - they will tell you.” (Devarim 32:7)

However, the situation these days is far removed from this Torah ideal. Today, youth and the future is generally idolised. Israel is famous for being the “Start-Up Nation” with an economy that is driven by technology. Australia is trying to follow suit and re-invent itself as a technology nation. We are witnessing an unprecedented boom in the use of technology to solve problems and improve our lives. The young entrepreneurs and developers with the great ideas are at the centre of all this excitement. Yet, in the process, the older members of our society who may not be as comfortable with technology (and don't even communicate via social media!) are becoming increasingly marginalised and seen as ‘irrelevant’.

Around 2,000 years ago the Mishnah³ already predicted what would happen in the times leading up to the Moshiach:

¹ Based on the Gemara, Sotah 34b.

² Vayikra 19:32.

"In the time prior to the coming of Moshiach, there will be an abundance ofchutzpah ... No-one will be able to rebuke ... The young will put the elders to shame and the old will have to stand up for the young. The son will be disrespectful to his father and the daughter will rise against her mother, as will the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. ... The son will not even be ashamed in front of his father."

However, it should not be this way. The older members of our society have a lot of wisdom and life experience to share with us. In order to access this fount of knowledge, we might need to resort to old fashioned methods of communication... such as 'face to face' instead of 'FaceTime'; snail mail instead of email.

The Midrash⁴ teaches that Avraham remarkably requested from Hashem that people should age. Before Avraham's time, people did not grow old. It was thus not possible to assess someone's age from their appearance. Avraham's request was based on his concern that when a father and son enter a room together, no-one will know which one deserves more honour. Hashem was pleased with Avraham's request: "You are right. You requested a good thing and you will be the first one [to grow old]".

There is a well-known story that is worth repeating here⁵.

"When Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky was an elderly man, he once flew from America to Eretz Yisrael together with his son. His son waited on him hand and foot and made sure that his every need was taken care of. The man sitting in the next seat noticed the honour and respect that the son showered on his father. He complained to Rav Kamenetsky that his children did not treat him so well and he asked for the secret to successful child-raising. Rav Kamenetsky explained that when children learn that each succeeding generation is one step further from Har Sinai, they understand that each generation is on a lower spiritual level. Older generations, being closer to the giving of the Torah, are holier and more deserving of respect. In contrast, for those who believe that man evolved from monkeys, this would suggest that each succeeding generation is on a higher level than the previous one. By extension it would be natural for the old to honour the young."

This supports the Mishnah's prediction exactly!

As we continue our exciting march towards the future, we need to pause and remember where we came from. The older members of our society might not be trendy, but they are holier than us and deserve our respect. And as a bonus, by acknowledging and respecting them, we may also benefit from some of their valuable wisdom that they gleaned from their life experience.

Let's try something this week:

1. Remember from Calev davening at the tomb of the Patriarchs the importance of turning to the previous generations for guidance and chizuk.
2. Try to increase your kavod (respect) for the older generation. Perhaps call an elderly relative or visit someone in an old age home. And make sure to take your children with you!

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Ledder.

³ Sotah 49b.

⁴ Yalkut Shimoni 105.

⁵ This story is found in many sources. I saw it in a shiur by Rav Yissocher Frand: torah.org/torah-portion/ravfrand-5773-achareimos

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About Darchai Noam

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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