

## DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

### “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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

### Parashat Pinchas – How to merit a miracle

In this week's Parasha, we read about Pinchas' valiant act on behalf of Hashem. On the advice of Bilaam, Bnei Yisrael had been tempted to commit harlotry and avodah zara with the Midianite women. Hashem sent a terrible plague which killed 24,000 people. And now Zimri, one of the princes of the tribe of Shimon, was about to spur on Bnei Yisrael to continue their misbehaviour by performing a grievous sin with Cosbi, a Midianite princess. Moshe felt powerless to stop them. He too had married a non-Jew (although in Moshe's case it was perfectly permissible) and he was concerned that he would appear to have a vested interest. Pinchas grabbed a spear, followed Zimri and Cosbi into the tent and killed them both. In Pinchas' merit, the plague ceased, and Hashem rewarded him with His covenant of peace and eternal priesthood.

Killing a leader of a tribe in cold blood in front of his family and tribe members was a dangerous act, but Pinchas rose to the challenge, acting zealously for the sake of Hashem. He made a superhuman effort purely for Hashem's honour and Hashem responded in kind by assisting Pinchas with supernatural miracles. The Gemara in Sanhedrin<sup>1</sup> 82b recounts that six miracles were performed for Pinchas at the time that he killed Zimri and Cosbi. One of those miracles was that Zimri could have called his tribe members to defend him from Pinchas, but he did not. Another is that both Zimri and Cosbi stayed on Pinchas' spear so that everyone could see what Pinchas had done. Another miracle is that Hashem sent an angel to cause destruction amongst the people so that they wouldn't interfere with Pinchas' valiant act. Another angel came to raise the opening of the tent so that Pinchas could emerge from the tent holding them aloft on the spear.

We have no idea how often Hashem rewards those who go above nature and merit Divine assistance. However some are quite well famous. One such story tells of an elderly gentleman who sat at the back of the Bet Midrash every day learning Torah. He had very thick glasses and he learnt with the aid of a magnifying glass. He continued to learn despite the difficulty.

Once, he invited a couple of the younger yeshiva students to his house for Shabbat. As they were walking there, he asked them what they were learning. To the amazement of the young students, the elderly gentleman was able to quote the entire sugya<sup>2</sup> off by heart. Over lunch he told them his story. When he was a younger man, he was an average student in Yeshiva. He enjoyed learning and life was good. But then one day he noticed that there was a problem with his eyesight. His parents took him to several eye specialists and they all told him the same news, he had a rare eye disease and he would certainly go blind. It was only a matter of time. In desperation he went to a number of Gedolim, and they all gave him the same advice – if he was to go blind, he would need to learn all of Shas Gemara off by heart. That way he could continue learning without eyesight. But that was impossible. He was a good student, but he wasn't a genius. How could he learn the entire Gemara off by heart?! But he didn't have a choice, his eyesight was worsening each day. He invested all of his effort into memorising the Gemara and he managed to remember many pages of the Gemara off by heart. And then, for no apparent reason, his eyesight stabilised. The doctors could not explain it.

Later, this man went to visit the Baba Sali, the great Tzaddik and kabbalist. Before he could open his mouth, the Baba Sali said to him "I know why you came to me, and I have the answer to your question. You want to know why your eyesight stopped deteriorating. The reason is that you went to above your natural limitations and tried to memorise all of Shas – a task that was clearly impossible. When you went above your nature, Hashem went above nature as well, and he stabilised your eyesight." The old man told the young students his story to inspire them to also go above nature, and thereby merit Divine assistance.

Rav Eliyahu Dessler is another example of someone who acted above his nature and achieved amazing results<sup>3</sup>. He escaped from Europe after the First World War and settled in England. In the summer of 1939, his wife and daughter went to Lithuania to visit his son who was studying in the Tels yeshiva. When the war broke out, he lost all contact with his family. It was only after many months that he heard that his son had escaped to America and his wife and daughter

<sup>1</sup> Sanhedrin 82b.

<sup>2</sup> Topic.

<sup>3</sup> The details of Rav Dessler's experiences are taken from the Brief Biography at the beginning of "Strive for Truth!" by Feldheim publishers.

had made it safely to Australia. Throughout the war he was alone in England. When he was asked to help set up a Kollel, he understood the importance of the project. Many yeshiva students had come to England as refugees, and they were lacking the resources and the facilities to continue their learning. Even in normal times, a huge effort would be required to establish and fund a Kollel. During the war, the project seemed impossible. Daily life was disrupted, business was at a standstill and the well-known philanthropists had fled to the countryside to escape the bombing. But Rabbi Dessler understood the need to invest in Torah education – how else would there be halachic authorities in 20 years' time? Rav Dessler, a shy and retiring man of 50 who had never been of robust health and had shied away from the limelight took on this project. He managed to do four full-time jobs at once – he ran the Kollel (without taking a salary), he raised most of its budget, he delivered mussar lectures at the Kollel and he continued to teach and guide his existing groups of students in London, Letchworth, Chesham and Manchester. All of this involved an enormous amount of travelling during difficult war-time conditions. Most of his travel was done overnight. And during the entire time he was always available to anyone who needed advice and he wrote a flood of letters and written lectures for his students who were dispersed around the world. Amazingly, during this difficult time, he wrote countless articles and lectures with brilliant chidushim<sup>4</sup> – many of which were later published.<sup>5</sup>

Another, relatively recent gadol who rose above the bounds of nature, was Rav Nosson Tzvi Finkel, the American-born Rosh Yeshiva of the Mir Yeshiva in Jerusalem<sup>6</sup>. During his leadership, the Mir grew into the largest Yeshiva in Israel. It was estimated that he taught 25,000 students over his lifetime and he raised an estimated US\$500 million for the Mir and its various institutions during his stewardship. He continued with this non-stop work, despite the fact that he suffered from Parkinsons disease for the last 28 years of his life. It became difficult for him to walk and talk, and he suffered from involuntary spasms and slurred speech. Nevertheless, he continued to learn for hours each day, gave regular shiurim and travelled overseas regularly to raise funds for the Yeshiva. He organised the construction of 4 new buildings to house the ever-growing student body and he opened a number of new institutions around the country. In later years, when his illness had progressed, he would lie on his couch and invite students to his house to learn.

One of his students tells of how he showed Rav Finkel his proposed study plan. Rav Finkel kept on pushing him to be more ambitious and to add to his program. He said to the student "כל התורה כולה – you have to aim to learn the entire Torah. Don't settle for anything less. He then showed the student his own plans for the Yeshiva. Rav Finkel had already overseen a massive growth of the Yeshiva. He was now at an advanced age and his illness was debilitating. But he showed his student his ambitious plan of growth and the building projects that he was still planning for the future.

At Rav Finkel's shiva, an elderly man came to visit and speak to the mourning family. He said that Rav Finkel had set the bar very high for him. This man had been an exceptionally strong learner in his youth. However, he developed the same disease as Rav Finkel. He took medication to control the symptoms, but the medication caused his mind to become foggy and he couldn't learn properly. Rav Finkel had refused to take medication. He had chosen to put up with the pain and the debilitating symptoms and keep his mind sharp.

We may not be on the same level as the great people discussed above. But we can always choose to rise above the bounds of our nature and ask Hashem to help us succeed. If we are acting l'shem Shamayim and Hashem wills it, we may also see how Hashem lifts the veil of nature and helps us to succeed.

Let's try something this week:

1. Think about the amazing accomplishments of Pinchas, the man with the eye disease, Rabbi Dessler and Rav Nosson Tzvi Finkel. Contemplate the fact that they ignored their natural constraints and acted with pure motives l'shem shamayim and how Hashem helped them succeed.
2. If you have a mitzva project that you want to start but have been hesitating – just do it! If your motives are pure, trust that Hashem will help you to rise above your nature and succeed.
3. Start a daily or weekly journal recording all the times that Hashem helped you in mini-miraculous ways.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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<sup>4</sup> Original ideas.

<sup>5</sup> The interested reader is directed to Michtav Me'Eliyahu or Strive for Truth which is an English translation.

<sup>6</sup> This information was taken from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nosson\\_Tzvi\\_Finkel\\_\(Mir\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nosson_Tzvi_Finkel_(Mir)) and an interview with one of Rav Finkel's students.