

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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

Parashat Breishit – The curse of Adam and Chava

Welcome back to the ninth year of Darchai Noam!

In this week's Parasha of Breishit, we read about the first sin and the subsequent curse of Adam and Chava.

Let's look at Chava's curse first. Part of her curse was the pain of childbirth.¹ There are many options available to manage or decrease the pain of childbirth – from breathing exercises to meditation, from a TENS machine to an epidural. But no-one in their right mind would try to *increase* the pain of childbirth. Why? Because the pain of childbirth is a curse! Why would anyone want to increase a curse?!?

Let's now look at Adam's curse. Part of Adam's curse is that “with the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread”.² No longer would Adam have the luxury of having all of his needs taken care of in the Garden of Eden. Hashem would still provide him with his needs, but there would now be a price that he would have to pay. Adam would have to work hard for his livelihood. The Gemara teaches us that Hashem decides every year between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur each person's parnassah for the following year.³ But we will only receive that parnassah if we pay the price by putting in effort. The effort creates the illusion that it was our efforts that gave rise to the parnassah. But in reality, Hashem provides us with the same parnassah regardless of how much effort we exert, as long as the effort that we exert is “reasonable”.⁴

Now let's remember, this price of working for parnassah is a curse. And as we inquired in relation to Chava's curse above, who would voluntarily want to increase a curse? Why would anyone in their right mind want to work longer and harder than they need to? Nevertheless, this is a real problem that plagues many of us. We spend far too long at work, at the expense of time spent with our family and time spent working on our spiritual endeavours. There are numerous stories of great Rabbis who would conduct business until they had earned enough to cover their expenses for the day and would then stop trading.⁵ We may not be at the level where we can just work to cover our expenses for each day, but many of us go too far to the other extreme.

We should point out that the demarcation between Adam's curse and Chava's curse is not so clear. Many females and males share roles and thus share each other's 'curse' too. Chava's curse doesn't just include the pain of childbirth itself, it extends to the pain of raising children. And fathers who act responsibly share in that aspect of Chava's curse. Similarly, many women share in Adam's curse – they are either working themselves or they condone the attitude that encourages the problematic behaviour that we referred to above.

¹ Breishit 3:16.

² Breishit 3:19.

³ Gemara, Beitzah 16a.

⁴ See chapter 21 of Mesillat Yesharim where this idea is explained in further detail.

⁵ For example, at one stage of his life the Chofetz Chaim had a grocery store and he would only trade each day until he had earned enough for that day. (The Chafetz Chaim, Artscroll 1984, Rabbi Moses M. Yoshor p71.

At this point I can't resist sharing with you an old joke that highlights how men can share in Chava's curse.

The new father was nervously pacing up and down the waiting room outside the delivery room while his wife was giving birth to their first child. His heart was racing, and he felt sick with worry. Finally, the nurse came out with the good news: "Congratulations, you are the father of a healthy baby girl". "Thank G-d it's a girl!" he replied, "she will never have to suffer like I just suffered now!"

Last Shabbat, we read Kohelet, one of Shlomo Hamelech's books of wisdom. The Ramban summarises the three main messages of Kohelet: don't waste time chasing after physical desires because they are only ephemeral anyway; remember that our spiritual accomplishments are eternal; and don't expect to understand how Hashem runs the world. The first two messages support the idea that spending too much time at work is simply counter-productive at best.

Consider the following:

Reuven has been trying his best to increase his learning and to cut back on his work hours. Reuven was meeting up with some old school friends that he hadn't seen for a few years. During their conversation, the friends provided an update of how they were progressing in their career. Reuven mentioned that he was now working part time. Reuven's friends could not understand why he was only working part time. Their response was immediate:

"But why?" "What's wrong?" "Are you OK?" "Are you unwell?"

Reuven tried to explain:

"I'm not working full time because... I don't need to... and I don't want to."

The friends were perplexed at Reuven's decision. He explained to them that he had done a budget and realised that he didn't need to work full time at this point in his life. However, the puzzled look on the faces of Reuven's friends revealed that they did not fully understand.

Many Jewish people have adopted the Western World philosophy that people should work the maximum hours possible so as to maximise income. Generally, the only people who are exempt from this assumption are the 'super-rich' who do not have to work, those who are unwell and 'stay-at-home mums' who are busy raising children.

Let's have a brief look at some history to get a broader perspective on this issue.

The Industrial revolution⁶ was characterised by a lack of regulation, extremely long working days (as much as 10-16 hours per day, 6 days per week) and the use of child labour. This gave birth to the 'Eight Hour Day Movement' which demanded a maximum working day of 8 hours and greater rights for workers. Over a number of decades, trade unions gradually increased in power and many countries mandated a maximum eight hour working day.

During the 20th century, as technology increased at a dramatic pace, there was a hope that more work would be done by machines which would free up our time for other pursuits (such as leisure). However, as we all know, this did not eventuate.

More recently, as communication methods became faster, we are now in a situation where people are constantly on call 24/7 (or 24/6 if they keep Shabbat). We seem to have given up on the aspirations of

⁶ The Industrial Revolution began in Great Britain and was characterised by the transition to new manufacturing processes in the period from about 1760 to around 1820-1840. This transition included going from hand production methods to machines, new chemical manufacturing and iron production processes, the increasing use of steam power, the development of machine tools and the rise of the factory system. [This description was sourced from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Industrial_Revolution and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eight-hour_day]

the Eight Hour Day Movement and we are no longer bothered when we regularly work late into the night and through the weekend.

However, this Western mindset does not accord with the Torah way of life. Instead of maximising Adam's curse, we should strive to minimise its effects. And instead, use the most beneficial gift of all, the gift of time, to strengthen our spiritual side. Working on our relationships, perfecting our character traits and focusing on Torah and mitzvot, our only accomplishments that are truly eternal.

In order to do this, we need to change our underlying assumptions. There is nothing wrong with working part time. If a family is able to support themselves comfortably without the need for full time work this is ideal and a bracha! Most of us have to work to support our families and make ends meet. But we should do an honest assessment of how much time we are spending at work and whether it is strictly necessary.

If we want to cut back on unnecessary work hours, we need strong emunah. We need faith in Hashem that He will give us what we need when we need it. Emunah helps us to avoid worrying too much about the future. As we pack up our sukkahs after the festival of sukkot, the following inspirational idea can help⁷. For the duration of sukkot we live in our sukkah in the same way that we live in our home. But we also know that the sukkah is called "tzila dimehemnuta" - "shelter of faith" – we look up at the flimsy schach and we feel that we are living under Hashem's direct protection. There is a mathematical principle that if $A = B$ then $B = A$. This mathematical principle teaches us that if we dwell in the sukkah like we dwell in our home, then we should also dwell in our home in the same way that we dwelt in the sukkah! So just because we are moving back into our home with its solid roof, we can still strive to live under the shelter of faith. We might just have to work a bit harder to recognise Hashem's guiding hand and protective Presence.

I believe that this idea of Adam's curse is very relevant and important, and I would like to focus on it in Darchai Noam over the next little while.

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to make a realistic calculation of how much time you spend either at work or thinking about work.
2. Think about the cost of this – what else could you be doing with your time?
3. Now look at both sides of the equation. Is it worth it?

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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⁷ See "Succos Secrets" by Rabbi Dovid Meisels, p32, based on Divrei Yoel.