

DARCHAI NOAM

Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם -

(Mishlei 3:17)

Vayeshev, December 2014

darchai.noam@gmail.com

How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Vayeshev – Rewarding the effort, not the outcome

In this week's Parsha of Vayeshev, we read of the tragic dispute amongst Yaakov's children. The brothers are convinced that Yosef is dangerous and does not deserve to be a part of Hashem's chosen people. They plot to kill him. Their judgement appears to be clouded by jealousy.

Reuven, the oldest, tries unsuccessfully to convince the other brothers not to harm Yosef. However, ultimately it is Yehuda who takes the leadership role. He convinces the other brothers not to kill Yosef, but rather to sell him as a slave (Breishit 37:26).

Let's take a closer look at the pasukim that describes Reuven's involvement.

*“And Reuven heard [the brothers' plot against Yosef] **and he saved him from their hands** and he said: ‘Let's not strike him with a deadly blow’.”* (Breishit 37:21).

Reuven is credited with saving Yosef from the hands of his brothers. But that is not what happened.

*“And Reuven said to them: “Do not shed blood. Throw him into this pit which is in the desert and do not raise a hand against him” **in order to save him from their hands** to return him to his father.”* (Breishit 37:22).

Rashi explains that the words “in order to save him from their hands” is testimony by the Torah that Reuven was planning to save Yosef. He was planning to return later and rescue Yosef from the pit. Meanwhile, while Yosef was languishing in the pit, the other brothers are planning what to do with him. Then Yehuda successfully convinces the brothers that there would be no gain from killing Yosef and they should rather sell him as a slave. When Reuven returns to rescue Yosef, he is too late. Yosef has already been sold as a slave.

In light of Rashi's explanation, the bolded text in passuk 21 (see above) doesn't seem to make sense. Reuven is credited with saving Yosef from the hands of his brothers, but he did not in fact succeed in doing so. So why does the Torah state that Reuven did save Yosef? Because Reuven had the intention and he tried his best to save Yosef. We can learn from this that if we genuinely try to do a good deed but we are unsuccessful, Hashem credits us as if we were successful.

Imagine if the same were true in the physical world. Someone reached into the cupboard for a container of medicine, but accidentally took a container of poison. If they inadvertently swallowed the poison, their body would suffer the harmful effects. It doesn't matter that they intended to consume the medicine. In contrast, in Hashem's mercy he runs the spiritual world in a different way. He often gives us reward for our intentions, even if those intentions don't bear fruit.

Our job is to emulate Hashem and act in a G-dly manner. We too should try to recognise people's efforts, even if those efforts are not successful. Sometimes this is easy for us to do, for example when it comes to our children. Consider the following story¹:

Nicholas was a very earnest boy in Grade 5. He very much wanted to do something special for his mother's birthday. He saved up his pocket money for weeks. On the way to school on the morning of her birthday he stopped off at a florist to buy the nicest bunch of flowers that

¹ Based on a story in “Nicholas and the Gang” by René Goscinny.

he could afford. He carefully placed the bunch of flowers in his school bag. That probably wasn't the smartest place to keep the flowers. His bag was thrown around quite a bit, as is common with Grade 5 boys. At the end of the school day he took the bunch of flowers out of his bag and carried them in his hand. Some of the petals had fallen off and the stems were a bit bent. On the way home he stopped for his usual game of soccer with his friends and left the flowers on the sideline. The flowers got a bit more squashed when other school bags were thrown on top of them. On the way home he dropped the bunch of flowers a few times and once they landed in a muddy puddle of water. By the time he got home all of the petals had fallen off and the bunch of flowers was a dirty, soggy bunch of broken stems. His mother was delighted. She told him it was the best present that she had ever received. And she meant it.

It's often easier to recognise and praise the efforts of our children because we naturally empathise with them and we often don't rely on the success of their efforts. But it can be harder if we are personally affected by the success or failure of someone else's efforts. Consider the following scenarios:

- Rachel had been looking for a shidduch for a number of years. Her friend Leah thought of someone for her and she went to a lot of trouble to investigate his background and set up the first date. Unfortunately the date was a disaster. Rachel knew straight away that it was a waste of time.
- David was out of work and looking for a new position. His friend Shimon set up an interview for him with a very good company. David was very keen but unfortunately the interview didn't go so well and he wasn't offered a job.
- Sharon's car wouldn't start. Her brother came over to her house to try to fix it up for her. Unfortunately he ended up doing more damage than good. Sharon missed an important meeting and she had an expensive repair bill.

If people try to help us and they are unsuccessful, we may instinctively feel angry or frustrated at the outcome and end up blaming them for their involvement. However we can work hard to overcome our natural instincts and instead emulate Hashem and thank them genuinely for their efforts.

This idea also helps with how we view ourselves. We need to remember that the success of our efforts is always outside of our control. Our job in this world is to put in the appropriate level of hishtadlut (effort) and then let go of the results. If we genuinely try our best to get something done but we are not successful, we should not be so hard on ourselves. All we can do is our best and let Hashem do the rest.

We should also bear in mind that we never know the real outcome of someone's actions. It could be that Reuven managed to delay the brothers for long enough for Yehuda to come up with the plan to sell Yosef. So maybe Reuven did play an indirect role in saving Yosef. The same applies to our scenarios mentioned above. Maybe Rachel's date was a disaster, but by going on the date she somehow managed to meet her soul mate. Maybe David's interviewer mentioned David to one of their colleagues in a different company and that colleague ultimately offered David his dream job. Maybe Sharon's broken car saved her from being involved in a car accident. Even if we don't see a successful outcome, we still need to recognise someone's efforts and express our gratitude.

Let's try something this week:

1. Pay attention to when people make an effort to help us. Remember how the Torah recognised Reuven because of his intentions and efforts, not his ultimate success, and try to act in the same way. Even if the person is not successful they deserve our gratitude.
2. If we are not successful in an endeavour we must remember to be gentle on ourselves because all we can do is our best. The outcomes of our actions are not up to us, they are up to Hashem and he ultimately knows what is the best outcome.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

About Darchai Noam

The passuk 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 parsha 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'reiacha kamocho' – loving one's fellow as oneself.

If you know someone who might enjoy receiving this email please feel free to pass it on to them or email me their details so I can add them to the subscription list.

You are welcome to use the content of this email in any way that will help to spread the learning of Torah. However please attribute credit appropriately.

How to subscribe or unsubscribe

If you would like to subscribe or unsubscribe to Darchai Noam, please send an email to darchai.noam@gmail.com with the word 'subscribe' or 'unsubscribe' in the subject.