

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Vayeshev
December 2017 / Cheshvan 5778

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Vayeshev – being careful not to embarrass others

In this week's Parsha of Vayeshev we read about the famous story of Yehudah and Tamar.

Tamar was married to Yehuda's first born son, Er. However Er was evil and he died young, leaving Tamar without children. Yehudah then gave Tamar his second-born son Onan. This was a fulfilment of the mitzvah of yibum (levirate marriage) whereby if a man dies childless, his brother should marry the widow.¹ Unfortunately, Onan was also wicked and he too died young without having children. Yehudah told Tamar to return to her father's house until his third son Shelah was old enough to marry her too. However, in reality Yehudah was in no rush for Shelah to marry Tamar. He feared that the premature dying was related to Tamar herself.

However, Tamar was truly righteous. She knew that she was destined to have children from Yehudah's family. Her descendants would ultimately include David HaMelech and his line of kings, prophets (including Isaiah) and ultimately the Moshiach. Realising that Yehudah was stalling, she decided to take matters into her own hands. She disguised herself as a harlot and seduced Yehudah himself. Yehudah did not recognise Tamar because of her disguise. Note that some commentators point out that prior to the giving of the Torah, the father of the deceased husband could also perform the mitzvah of yibum. Therefore a union between Yehudah and Tamar was permissible and in fact a mitzvah.

It is difficult to understand how the righteous Yehudah could be seduced by a harlot. According to the Midrash² Yehudah had no interest whatsoever in this 'mysterious lady' and he simply passed by her on his way. However, Hashem planned that kings should descend from the union of Tamar and Yehudah's family. Hashem therefore sent the angel Michael to force Yehudah back. Yehudah had no money to pay Tamar's fee, so he left with her his signet ring, his cloak and his staff as a pledge.

Later, Yehudah was informed that Tamar had become pregnant. Since Tamar was still legally chained to Yehudah's family (due to the law of yibum), her act was considered to be adultery. This was punishable by death. As Tamar was about to be led off to the furnace to be burnt for her sin, she discreetly sent the ring and cloak to her father-in-law with a message that the owner of these items was responsible for her pregnancy. So Yehudah confessed and Tamar lived.

In his commentary, Rashi tells us that Tamar could have openly revealed the truth about Yehudah's role. However she was determined not to embarrass him at any cost, even at the expense of her own life. She therefore said to herself: "If he confesses, let him confess. And if not, let them burn me. But I will not embarrass him." From this event the Rabbis learn that it is better to be cast into a fiery furnace rather than to embarrass someone else in public (Gemara Sotah 10b).

How does this accord with the Torah teaching that there are only three cardinal sins for which one must give up their life rather than transgress – idolatry, murder and immorality? The Gemara³ explains that when one embarrasses someone in public, it is comparable to spilling their blood. The term used by the Gemara for embarrassing someone is "whitening their face". This is because the embarrassed person first blushes,

¹ There are very deep mystical ideas behind this mitzvah. By marrying the widow the deceased brother is somehow given a second chance to build up his house and establish descendants. These days we no longer practice yibum and we rather perform the rite of chalitzah which frees up the widow to marry someone else.

² Breishit Rabba 85:8 and Midrash Tanchuma Vayeshev 17.

³ Baba Metzia 58b.

which initially causes the blood to rush to their face and then the blood drains away, leaving their face white.

The Gemara⁴ gives an example of this principle in practice. Mar Ukva had the practice of giving tzedaka to poor people without them knowing his identity. His reasoning was that the poor person would be embarrassed in front of the donor if he knew his identity. So Mar Ukva would surreptitiously slip money under the door and then make a quick getaway. One day, Mar Ukva and his wife were visiting the homes of their regular recipients together. At one particular stop they heard the door knob turning. The recipient was about to open the door which would inevitably mean that he would discover their identity. Mar Ukva and his wife quickly fled. The only place that they could hide to avoid being discovered was a fiery furnace! They jumped in. As a result of their merits they were saved from harm.⁵

The gedolim are keenly aware of the serious ramifications of embarrassing someone in public.

While lecturing his students, Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach had a policy that the students only ask questions related to the subject matter at hand. This policy was to help ensure that everyone remained focused. One of the students was a nervy sort and had never yet asked a question in public. One day, this student shyly put up his hand and proceeded to ask his first question. Unfortunately, the question had no relevance to the topic of the lecture. The other students expected Rav Auerbach to calmly explain his policy and ask the boy to discuss his question with him after the class. However, much to their surprise, the Rav complimented the boy generously on the well thought-out question. He then devoted considerable time to providing a detailed answer. He later explained that this boy was keenly sensitive to being embarrassed. If Rav Auerbach would not have answered the boy's question his confidence might have been crushed and he may have been deterred from asking future questions.

What about if we are the subject of embarrassment? What is the appropriate attitude for us to take? The Tomer Devorah⁶ provides us with the following advice.⁷ All suffering in this world serves as a kapara or an atonement for our sins. It reduces our suffering in the next world, where the punishment would be much greater.⁸ The Tomer Devorah explains that being embarrassed is the best form of suffering because it doesn't harm us physically or financially, and it doesn't harm our family members. Therefore when one is humiliated they should remember that this injury to their pride is simply an atonement for their sins and they should be grateful! Though this may be difficult to achieve with a full heart, it is certainly something to which we can aspire.

So on the one hand, we need to remember the lesson of Tamar, Mar Ukva and Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach as brought above and be very careful to avoid any speech or behaviour that might cause embarrassment to another. On the other hand, if we ourselves have been publicly embarrassed we can try to remember the advice of the Tomer Devorah and comfort ourselves by remembering that it's a kapara and it could have been much worse.

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to take extra care to avoid embarrassing others and remember that the Gemara compares it to killing another person.
2. Work on absorbing the teaching of the Tomer Devorah so that the next time we are embarrassed in public we will hopefully suffer less pain and feel less resentment.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

⁴ Ketubot 67b

⁵ The Gemara points out the Mar Ukva's feet did actually get slightly singed from the heat while his wife was totally unharmed. That was because Mar Ukva's wife's merits were slightly greater, because she often gave food as charity which was usable straight away. Mar Ukva on the other hand would often give money which is not as readily helpful.

⁶ Written by Rav Moshe Cordovero, the leader of the Tsfat Kabbalists before the Arizal in the mid-16th Century.

⁷ My thanks to Rav Schenkolewski for making me aware of this beautiful paragraph during his series of shiurim on Hilchot Brachot: <http://www.iyunhalacha.org/>

⁸ See Mishnah Berurah 222:4.

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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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