

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Vayeshev
December 2018 / Kislev 5779

darchai.noam@gmail.com
www.darchai-noam.com

How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Vayeshev – Owing up to our mistakes

In this week's Parsha of Vayeshev we read about the famous incident of Yehuda and Tamar. This incident would ultimately have massive implications for Yehuda, the Jewish people and the entire world.

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 Yehuda was in no rush for Shelah to marry Tamar. He was concerned that Tamar was responsible for his sons dying early.

In actual fact, Tamar was truly righteous. She knew that she was destined to have children from Yehuda's family. Her descendants would include David HaMelech and his line of kings, prophets (including Isaiah) and ultimately the Moshiach (which would bring the entire world to its ultimate purpose). Realising that Yehuda was stalling, she decided to take matters into her own hands. She disguised herself as a harlot and seduced Yehudah himself. 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 actually permissible and in fact a mitzvah.

Yehuda did not recognise Tamar because of her disguise. Yet, 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 Yehuda'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, Yehuda found out that Tamar had become pregnant. Since Tamar was still legally chained to Yehuda's family (due to the law of yibum), her act was considered to be adultery. This act 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, cloak and staff to her father-in-law with a message that the owner of these items was responsible for her pregnancy.

At this point Yehuda realised the true identity of the harlot. He was faced with a few options:

Option 1: He could say nothing. Tamar would then be executed and no-one would be any wiser.

Option 2: Yehuda was actually the judge in this case. He might have been able to show clemency and save Tamar from death.³

Option 3: He could confess that he was the responsible for Tamar's pregnancy. Since the father of the deceased husband could perform yibum, Yehuda's confession would lead to Tamar's exoneration. However, obviously this admission would cause intense embarrassment for Yehuda.

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 I haven't seen this option written anywhere by the commentators and I don't know for sure that it was a realistic option. The evidence was apparently conclusive and Yehuda may not have had the authority to grant clemency.

Without hesitating, Yehudah chose option 3. Thus, Tamar lived, and her pregnancy was saved.

Before Yaakov passed away, he blessed each of his children. The blessing for Yehuda included the following:

“The sceptre shall not depart from Yehuda” (Parshat Vayechi, Sefer Breishit 49:10)

Rashi explains that from the time of David Hamelech, the kingship would never leave the tribe of Yehuda. This lasted throughout the kingdom of Yehuda and included the exilarchs (princes) in Babylon who ruled over the Jewish people with a sceptre and who were appointed by royal mandate.⁴

As Yaakov’s firstborn, Reuven should really have been entitled to the kingship. However, due to Reuven’s sin⁵ this honour was taken from him. We might assume that the kingship should rightly have gone to Shimon instead, as he was next in line. So what did Yehuda do to merit earning the kingship? The Tosefta⁶ cites several possible reasons, one of which is that Yehuda earned the kingship by admitting his guilt and setting Tamar free in this week’s Parsha. The other suggestions are that Yehudah convinced his brothers not to kill Yosef⁷ or that his tribe sanctified Hashem’s name by being the first to jump into the sea after Yetziat Mitzrayim⁸.

Some commentators have suggested that the common denominator between these incidents was that Yehuda took responsibility.⁹ The Tosefta itself suggests that it was Yehuda’s humility that tipped the balance towards Yehuda’s appointment as king.

Regardless of which event ultimately led to his tribe’s appointment, Yehuda’s behaviour in the incident of Tamar clearly shows the hallmark of greatness. Though he may have initially acted in a way that would cause himself humiliation, he took the righteous path by owning up to his mistake, at the potential cost of his reputation. Ironically, the Torah records this very incident for posterity as a shining example of the correct way to act. Yehuda merited the eternal kingship of the Jewish people and ultimately the Moshiach. Even the word “Jew” or “Yehudi” is based on Yehuda’s name.

What can we learn from Yehuda’s behaviour? We may find ourselves in situations where it is tempting to cover up the truth to save face. Admittedly, the stakes and the drama will not usually be as high as the potential execution of an innocent woman. Perhaps we bumped into someone’s parked car and we are tempted not to leave a note¹⁰. Perhaps we made an error at work and can choose to keep quiet hoping that no-one will notice, or that someone else might conveniently be blamed. We can learn from Yehudah that the right thing to do is to admit our shortcomings and mistakes, even though it might be embarrassing or personally costly. And just like Yehuda’s act had eternal benefit, so too, our acts of bravery and self-sacrifice will stand in our merit for all time.

Let's try something this week:

1. The next time we are tempted to cover up the truth in order to save face, remember the amazing story of Yehuda’s confession. Be inspired by his courage to do what he knew was right.
2. Remember, just like Yehuda’s action ultimately gave him a huge reward, so too our courageous admissions of our mistakes will be recorded for posterity to our advantage. Contemplating this can help to encourage us to face up to the consequences of our behaviour.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

*** **

⁴ Rashi’s commentary to Breishit 49:10.

⁵ See Breishit 35:22, Parshat Vayishlach, together with the commentaries on this pasuk.

⁶ Masechet Brachot.

⁷ See Breishit 7:26-27, Parshat Vayeshev.

⁸ This event obviously took place after Yaakov’s bracha where he effectively appointed Yehuda as the king. We may ask, how can a subsequent event secure Yehuda a bracha that was bestowed earlier in time? Perhaps the jumping into the sea by Yehuda’s descendants was just a manifestation of the character trait that Yaakov had already recognised in his son Yehuda. Or it may be that, since Yaakov was a prophet, he knew that Yehuda would earn the honour he was bestowing on him.

⁹ See for example an article by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen: <https://www.hidabroot.com/article/78961/Yehudah---Taking-Responsibility>

¹⁰ Someone did that to my car recently. Don’t get me started!

About Darchai Noam

Darchai Noam is available online at www.darchai-noam.com and www.parshasheets.com. You can access this week's edition of Darchai Noam, archived back issues of Darchai Noam and other divrei Torah.

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, usually 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.

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.

Many of the ideas that I use in Darchai Noam are based on ideas that I read or heard from various sources. Where possible I try to quote the source. However, in some cases I cannot recall the source. For that I apologise. If I do discuss an idea that I heard from somewhere else, any errors are purely my own.

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.