

## DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

### “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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

### Vayeshev – Trying to outwit the Angel of Death

In his week's Parsha of Vayeshev, we read about Yosef's dreams and the resulting rivalry between Yosef and his brothers.

Yosef dreams that he is destined to rule over his brothers and that one day they will bow down to him. The brothers are not happy with these dreams and they become jealous. They decide that an end must be put to Yosef and his dreams.<sup>1</sup> One day Yosef is on his way towards the brothers and the brothers want to seize their chance. They debate what should be done to Yosef. At first, they contemplate killing him and throwing the body into a pit:

*So they said to one another, "Look, that dreamer is coming. Now let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits and we will say [to their father, Yaakov] that a wild beast devoured him. Then we shall see what will become of his dreams." (Breishit 37:19-20)*

What did the brothers mean by the words "Then we shall see what will become of his dreams"? They were planning to kill him, so isn't it clear that his dreams would not come true? In his commentary, the Ramban provides us with three possible explanations:

- The brothers were mocking Yosef. In effect they were saying in a sarcastic manner, "we will see what will become of his dreams!"
- An alternative explanation, which the Ramban prefers, is that the brothers were not joking, rather they were speaking in a serious manner. They meant that if Yosef would be able to survive this attempt on his life, this would be a Divine sign that his dreams were destined to come true.
- The Ramban then brings the explanation of the Sages, which is also the explanation brought by Rashi. The Midrash<sup>2</sup> states that Hashem Himself spoke these words, and not the brothers. Hashem was saying: "They [the brothers] might say "Let us kill him" but we will see what will really become of Yosef's dreams". In other words, Hashem was saying "let's see whose words will stand up, yours [the brothers], or Mine".

The third explanation teaches us that Hashem's will always prevails. Yosef was destined to rule over his brothers and that was Hashem's will. And as we see, the brothers decide to sell Yosef as a slave and this ends up triggering a chain of events that actually leads to Yosef's dreams being fulfilled! Yosef became the second in command in Mitzrayim and ended up ruling over his brothers, and they had to bow to him.

We see a similar scenario arise in a dramatic story that is brought in the Gemara.<sup>3</sup>

One day, Shlomo HaMelech saw the Angel of Death looking very dejected. Shlomo asked him what was wrong. The Angel of Death revealed that he had been sent on a mission to take the lives of two of Shlomo's faithful scribes – the brothers Elichoreph and Achiya. The Angel of Death was struggling to fulfil his mission and this made him sad. Shlomo was worried that his two friends were in danger. He decided to try to outsmart the Angel

<sup>1</sup> On a superficial reading, this action of the brothers appears to be a simple case of jealousy and sibling rivalry. However, the brothers were great Tzaddikim and it is difficult to ascribe such behaviour to them. Some commentators have suggested that the brothers honestly thought that they were acting correctly. They understood that Yosef's behaviour was a threat to the newly formed family of Israel which was to be the foundation of the nation of Israel. Just like Avraham and Yitzchak had children who were not included in the Jewish people (i.e. Yishmael and Eisav) they assumed that Yaakov could also have a son that would not be included. However we understand this story, it seems that the brothers did act inappropriately on some level, even if it was a very subtle sin. This is obviously a much larger discussion for another time.

<sup>2</sup> Tanchuma Yashan 13.

<sup>3</sup> Sukkah 53a.

of Death by sending his friends to the city of Luz. (Luz was a city over which the Angel of Death had no authority. The inhabitants of Luz would age but they would not die. Eventually, when they were ready for death, they would leave the city to die.<sup>4</sup>) Shlomo called upon mystical messengers to spirit his friends to the city of Luz as quickly as possible. The following day, he saw the Angel of Death again, but this time he looked happy. “Why are you happy?” asked Shlomo. The Angel of Death explained that his instructions had been to take the souls of Elichoreph and Achiya specifically at the gates of the city of Luz. He had been dejected the day before because he could not fulfil his mission – the brothers that he was trying to kill were in Jerusalem and not at the entrance to Luz. Ironically, by trying to save his friends, Shlomo had unwittingly brought about their death!

We can learn from the above story that Hashem’s will always prevail. We may think that things are under our control, but in reality, things work out the way Hashem wants them to. And sometimes our own actions actually help to bring about those very events that we are trying to prevent! This is exactly what happened when the brothers threw Yosef into a pit and then sold him as a slave. And even if we don’t help things along, Hashem has many agents in the world to ensure that things work out the way He wills it. For example, in the precursor to our story above, when Yosef was on his way to meet his brothers, he became lost. So Hashem sent a messenger (the angel Gabriel) to help direct Yosef back onto the correct path.<sup>5</sup>

What can we learn from this? Is everything predestined? Do our actions make no difference? Not at all. We don’t know what the Divine plan is and Hashem wants us to make an effort and do our best to achieve what is right. If it turns out that our intentions are against the Divine plan, then we will not be successful. But we will still be rewarded for our intentions and our efforts. And sometimes, it could be that Hashem is waiting for us to make the effort before he showers us with his bracha. If we don’t put in the effort, then the bracha will not come. But once we have put in the appropriate effort, we can relax and trust in Hashem because He is the only one who is in control. We have done our best and the results are out of our hands. Such an attitude can be enormously beneficial in reducing our stress levels. Internalising this truth may be a lifelong endeavour, so there is no better time than the present to start trying.

This reminds me of a joke.<sup>6</sup>

A man walks into a rundown house and sees a mother and her children screaming and wailing. There is no money and no food and they don’t know what to do. Meanwhile the father of the family is in his room singing and dancing with joy. “What is going on here?”, the man asks. The father explains. I am happy because I put my faith in Hashem. I know that if I put in the required effort, He will give me what I need. As for my family, they put their faith in me. I would also be despondent if I put faith in myself!

How can we be more like the father in this joke? After we put in the requisite effort, how can we learn to relax and leave things up to Hashem? One practical tip is to look out for little moments of Hashgacha Pratit in our own lives. These are the coincidences, ‘lucky breaks’ or ‘near-misses’ that we all experience. If we look hard enough, we can almost see Hashem hiding behind the scenes. This will help to remind us that Hashem is always there, making sure that things turn out right in the end.

Let’s try something this week:

1. Remember that Hashem is *always* in control of every outcome. If what we want goes against His plans, then we will not succeed. So why should we be stressed and upset? (I know, this is easier said than done!)
2. We still need to put in the necessary effort (hishtadlut) to achieve what we believe needs to be done. But then we can step back and have faith that Hashem’s plan will prevail and that His outcome is best.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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<sup>4</sup> The word ‘Luz’ is connected with eternal life. Luz is also the name of a small bone at the base of the skull that is indestructible. According to our tradition, the resurrection of the dead will begin from this bone. This bone receives its sustenance from food that is eaten at the Melave Malke (the meal that is eaten on Saturday night after Shabbat ends. So it is a good idea to eat a Melave Malke every week! (Ta’amei Haminhagim U’mekorai HaDinim, no. 425, by Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Sperling)

<sup>5</sup> See Breishit 37:15 with Rashi.

<sup>6</sup> I find the subject matter of this joke a bit disturbing, but I think that the message is very powerful.