

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Vayetze – Understanding the other person’s point of view

In this week’s Parsha of Vayetze we read about Yaakov and his family in the house of Lavan. Lavan tricked Yaakov into marrying Leah, instead of Rachel. Yaakov insisted on marrying Rachel as well. Rachel was Yaakov’s original choice and she was clearly the favoured wife.

*“He [Yaakov] came also to Rachel and **he [Yaakov] loved Rachel more than Leah...**” (Breishit 29:30) ¹*

The next pasuk is surprising:

*“Hashem saw that **Leah was hated**, so He opened her womb but Rachel was barren.” (Breishit 29:31)*

This seems to suggest that Yaakov loved Rachel but hated Leah! In the Haftorah from last week we read that Hashem loved Yaakov and hated Esav². Surely Yaakov’s feelings for Rachel and Leah are not synonymous with Hashem loving Yaakov and hating Esav!

In his commentary, the Ramban explains that Yaakov did in fact love Leah, as is suggested in pasuk 30³. However, whenever a man has two wives, it is almost inevitable that he will love one more than the other. The Ramban explains that Leah felt ‘hated’ because she knew that she was loved less than Rachel.

The anomaly between the two pasukim quoted above can be explained in terms of perspective. Pasuk 30 focuses on Yaakov’s perspective – ‘he’ (i.e. Yaakov) loved both women but he loved Rachel more. In contrast, pasuk 31 does not refer to Yaakov at all but rather refers to Leah as ‘hated’ in the passive term. Hashem Himself saw that Leah was hated. From Yaakov’s perspective, Leah was loved (albeit less than Rachel). From Leah’s subjective point of view, she was hated, because that is how she was looking at the situation. She could only see how much less she was loved than her sister and focusing on that lack made her feel hated. Hashem can see inside our hearts. He knew that Leah was loved but that she felt hated.

As egocentric beings, we are naturally able to more clearly see things from our own perspective. From the time that we are born we are selfish creatures and we only recognise ourselves and our own needs. It is difficult to see things from the perspective of others. Consider the amusing sight of watching young children playing hide and seek – sometimes,

¹ See Darchai Noam for Parshat Vayetze 2013 for a novel way of understanding this pasuk.

² Malachi 1:2-3.

³ The Ramban also presents another opinion – that Yaakov did actually hate Leah because she was involved in the deception instigated by Lavan.

instead of hiding, they just cover their eyes. They presume that if they can't see the other players then they can't be seen themselves!⁴

As we mature our forebrains develop and we (hopefully!) are more easily able to see things from others' perspective. However this perspective shift does not come naturally and often requires hard work. The Mishnah in Pirkei Avot (1:6) instructs us to judge everyone favourably. This requirement necessitates that we see things from the perspective of others.

Consider the following example.

Yehuda was driving to work one day when he almost had an accident. As Yehuda was about to turn into a side street, another car came speeding in the opposite direction, well over the speed limit. Yehuda slammed on his brakes and the other car swerved to miss him. It was very close. The other car then just sped off. Yehuda was fuming. He couldn't believe that drivers could be so irresponsible. For the rest of the day he told everyone who would listen (and even those who wouldn't) about the dangerous driver that he almost collided with. However, a few days later, Yehuda was very late to an important business meeting. He couldn't afford to lose this deal. He drove a little faster than usual, a bit over the speed limit. In fact, he almost had an accident, but luckily he swerved out of the way just in time. He had no problem justifying this behaviour to himself. This was an extremely important meeting and he was usually a very careful driver. "Everyone slips up sometimes and we're only human after all" he thought to himself.

Whenever there is a dispute, each side generally believes that they are correct and the other side is wrong. Yet there is almost never a black and white truth. In order to increase shalom and minimise hatred it can be helpful to try to see things from the other side's point of view. This forms the basis of role playing therapy, which family psychologists sometimes use by asking their patients to play the role of another member of the family. Stepping into another person's shoes can provide useful insights and help us to more easily see things from another perspective. We can thus understand and tolerate the behaviour of others. Ultimately this can lead to greater achdut and ahavat Yisrael.

Only Hashem can truly see into another person's heart and totally understand their perspective, as he did in the case of Leah. However, we can do our best to emulate Hashem as much as possible and try to understand the 'truth' from the other person's perspective. The better we understand how another person is feeling and their subjective needs, the better we are able to fulfil the mitzvah of v'ahavta l're'echa kamocho.

Let's try something this week:

1. When we interact with people this week we can strive to see things from the other's perspective. This is particularly important in our difficult interactions and disputes.
2. In order to consider another's perspective we might try the following techniques: pause and try to imagine how the other person is feeling; try to describe the event to ourselves from their perspective; imagine how we would feel if we were in their situation; remind ourselves that the other person has a very different upbringing and viewpoint to us.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

⁴ I can testify that this is a true phenomenon. I have seen children play hide and seek in this manner.

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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 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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