

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 – real emunah

In this week's Parsha of Vayetze we read about Yaakov fleeing for his life from his brother Eisav. Eisav was furious that Yaakov had 'stolen' the Brachot from Yitzchak. Rivkah advised Yaakov to hide out in Padan Aram (Rivka's home town) until Eisav's anger abated. There Yaakov will meet his wives and finally begin to build his family. In the narrative describing Yaakov's journey to Padan Aram, we have what may well be one of the most awe-inspiring and inspirational pasukim in the Torah:

“And he [Yaakov] arrived at the place and he lodged there because the sun had set, and he took some of the stones of the place and placed them at his head and he lay down in that place. And he dreamed...” (Breishit 28:10-11)

Yaakov goes on to have his famous dream about the ladder reaching up to heaven and the angels ascending and descending. However, there is something amazing about the very fact that Yaakov fell asleep. You may wonder, what is so inspirational about Yaakov going to sleep? He was probably quite tired. It was night time. Isn't it usual to go to sleep at night?

Rashi's commentary helps us to see just how amazing this incident really was. Rashi explains that Yaakov feared wild animals. Therefore he gathered some stones and placed them around his head. If Yaakov was really concerned about being attacked by wild animals, how would it help to place a few small stones around his head? A wild animal could easily get past the stones and attack Yaakov!

In his Darkai HaShleimut, Rabbi Shloma Margolis¹ explains that a person who truly trusts in Hashem understands that we have an obligation to do whatever we can do in each situation.² This is known as 'hishtadlut'. However, once we have done what we can do, we must understand that the outcome is up to Hashem. Once we have taken whatever steps we can take, there is no need to worry at all. We should put our faith in Hashem and trust that everything that happens is for the best. Yaakov knew that he had to take precautions against the wild animals. The only thing that he had at his disposal for this purpose was a handful of pebbles. He did whatever he could do, and then relaxed into slumber. Thus he let go of the results of his actions and left it up to Hashem.

Consider how remarkable Yaakov's sleep was. He was in the middle of nowhere, all by himself. It was dark and he was surrounded by wild animals. The only thing between him and the wild animals was a handful of pebbles. If we were in that situation we would almost certainly find it impossible to relax. And yet, Yaakov was so calm that he was able to fall asleep. That is real emunah. You can't fake that!

True emunah means a total faith in Hashem that everything is for the best and that there is no need whatsoever for worry or anxiety. Sometimes we can put on a show and appear calm on the outside. But only we know if we have truly reached the level of true emunah, the level of menuchat nefesh (tranquillity of the soul). A good indication of our success in internalising our emunah into our hearts is the degree to which we can 'rest easy' even in the face of severe, pressing difficulties, like Yaakov did.

If we can achieve this level of emunah, we don't just get a good night's sleep. We also achieve the ability to stay calm, to think clearly and to respond appropriately to whatever challenges we face.

¹ He passed away in February 2012 at the age of 99.

² Seen in an article by Rabbi Ozer Alport: <http://www.aish.com/tp/i/pp/134557488.html>

Emunah is perhaps one of the most important mitzvot in the Torah. The Gemara³ teaches us that Moshe was given 613 mitzvot and Habakkuk condensed them down into one fundamental principle, as it is stated: “The righteous person shall live by his faith” (Habakkuk 2:4). The Vilna Gaon explains that the main reason that the Torah was given to Bnei Yisrael was that they put their trust in Hashem.⁴

What steps can we take to work on our emunah in practice? We have previously quoted from the excellent guide book “Emunah, our lifeline in turbulent times” by Rabbi Yisroel Greenwald.⁵ Let's revisit his book and explore some practical suggestions to improve our emunah.

Talk about emunah: This is based on the concept that speech can be more powerful than thought. The mere act of saying words can have an effect on us, even if we don't feel it. For example, the Mishnah Berurah⁶ recommends that when preparing for Shabbat, one should verbalise the words “this is in honour of Shabbat”. The Mishnah Berurah explains that the very words themselves have the ability to infuse holiness into our actions. That is also why many of the mitzvot that deal with emunah involve speech (e.g. reciting the Shema and relating the story of the Exodus on Seder night). Similarly, just talking about emunah can have a positive effect.

Ask Hashem for the smallest needs: Rabbainu Yonah teaches that asking Hashem for whatever you want leads to emunah.⁷ The Gemara⁸ provides us with special prayers to be recited before seemingly trivial things like entering a bathhouse, taking medicine or entering or leaving a city. If we turn to Hashem for all of our needs, great or small, we come to realise that Hashem is in charge of everything. The act of turning to Hashem accustoms us to rely on Him which in turn affects our internal level of faith.

Remember Hashem's past kindnesses: In times of trouble, we can find comfort by reflecting on Hashem's past kindnesses. We should try to actively remember how far we have come in our lives, how much we have achieved and how many difficult challenges were successfully overcome. Just as He helped us in the past, He will surely help us again in the future. As Rabbi Greenwald cites: “Who is wise? Let him always remember these things and ponder the kindness of Hashem”.⁹

Patience: Remember that Hashem's salvation can often come at the last moment. Hashem acts this way to test us and to stretch our emuna 'muscles'. It is often when a person remains patient and calm that Hashem saves him. For example, when Hashem helped David Hamelech in a battle against the Philistines,¹⁰ He told David not to begin his attack until he heard the leaves of the trees rustling. Only then would he be assured of success. The Midrash explains that the leaves only began to rustle at the very last minute, when the enemy had almost reached David's camp. Yet David and his men had to remain patient, calmly listening out for the soft sound of the rustling leaves. They needed to have sufficient emunah such that they could have internal quiet in order to hear the faint external sound of the leaves rustling.

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to boost our level of emunah by adopting some of the suggestions listed above.
2. Like Yaakov, when we have done our maximum hishtadlut, it is time to relax and rest assured that Hashem will help us and save us.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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³ Makkot 23b-24a.

⁴ The Vilna Gaon's commentary to Mishlei 22:19.

⁵ See Darchai Noam for Parshat Korach 5777.

⁶ 250:2.

⁷ Rabbainu Yonah's commentary to Mishlei 3:6.

⁸ Brachot 60b.

⁹ Tehillim 107:43.

¹⁰ Shmuel Bet 5:24.

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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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