

## DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

### “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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

### Vayetze – Why did Bnei Yisrael have to suffer in Mitzrayim?

In his week's Parsha of Vayetze, we read about Yaakov's time in the house of Lavan. While struggling with his duplicitous father-in-law, Yaakov manages to build up his family and begin the nation of Israel. Rachel, Yaakov's primary wife, is barren and she has to go through the very painful experience of watching her sister and even the maid servants giving birth to children while she is missing out. Eventually Rachel is also blessed with children. In this week's Darchai Noam, let's focus on a discussion that took place between Rachel and Yaakov before Rachel was blessed with a child.

But first, let's discuss the following question: why did Bnei Yisrael need to suffer the crushing slavery in Mitzrayim?

Before we try to answer that question, we need to point out that causation can be a slippery concept. It can often be quite difficult to determine clearly what is the cause of a particular event. Often, there are multiple causes, some of which are more significant and some of which are less significant.

Let us now try to answer our question - what was the cause of the slavery in Mitzrayim?

Though we can never know exactly why Hashem does what he does, a common answer that is given to this question is that the brothers' jealousy was the cause of the slavery. Because of their jealousy, Yosef was sold into slavery and that began a chain of events that lead to Bnei Yisrael being enslaved in Mitzrayim.

In Rashi's commentary on the verse which mentions Yosef's coat of many colours (the K'tonet Passim)<sup>1</sup>, Rashi quotes a verse from Megillat Esther<sup>2</sup> which equates 'passim' with 'karpas' (fine white cotton). The Chizkuni<sup>3</sup> explains that the karpas at the seder, which we dip into salt water, reminds us of the coat of many colours that the brothers dipped into the blood of a goat in order to deceive Yaakov. The Seder recalls our exodus from Mitzrayim, so it is appropriate that we start the Seder with a reminder of why we went into Mitzrayim in the first place – jealousy and hatred between brothers.

However, although the brothers' jealousy was the immediate trigger, it seems that there were even earlier events which led to the slavery. Our exile in Mitzrayim was already foretold to Avraham at the Brit ben Habetarim in Parashat Lech Lecha<sup>4</sup>. What did Avraham do to deserve that his descendants would need to suffer in Mitzrayim? Our Sages provide four answers to this question<sup>5</sup>:

- He drafted Torah scholars into his army in the war against the four kings thus interrupting their Torah learning.<sup>6</sup>
- He went too far in questioning Hashem and did not have enough faith in His promise - when he asked: “By what shall I know that I shall inherit [the land]?”<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Parashat Vayeshev, Breishit 37:31.

<sup>2</sup> Esther 1:6.

<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Chizkiyah ben Manoach, a French Rabbi of the 13th century. He is generally known by the title of his commentary on the Chumash - Chizkuni.

<sup>4</sup> See Breishit Chapter 15.

<sup>5</sup> The first three reasons appear in the Gemara (Nedarim 32a). The fourth reason appears in the Midrash (Breishit Rabbah 54).

<sup>6</sup> Parashat Lech Lecha, Breishit Chapter 14.

<sup>7</sup> Parashat Lech Lecha, Breishit 15:8.

- He kept people from joining the monotheistic faith after the war against the four kings. Avraham had a chance to bring the returned captives under his influence but he returned them to the king of Sodom instead.<sup>8</sup>
- He entered into a covenant with his foreign neighbour – Avimelech, the king of the Plishtim.<sup>9</sup>

All of these reasons show a slight imperfection in Avraham's faith. Obviously, this was only a problem on Avraham's exalted level. However, Avraham was the foundation of the Jewish people. When you are building a huge skyscraper, the foundations have to be perfect. The slightest imperfection can be disastrous. Therefore, the Divine Wisdom decreed that Bnei Yisrael would have to go through the exile and the miraculous exodus in order to rectify this slight fault.

The above suggests five possible contributory causes for the exile. However, in this week's Parasha, there is another possible contributory reason for the slavery. Let's now take a close look at the conversation between Rachel and Yaakov which took place before Rachel was finally blessed with a child:

*Rachel saw that she had not borne children to Yaakov, so Rachel became envious of her sister<sup>10</sup>; she said to Yaakov, "Give me children – otherwise I am dead." Yaakov's anger flared up at Rachel, and he said, "Am I instead of G-d Who has withheld from you fruit of the womb?"*

The commentators explain that Rachel wanted Yaakov to pray for her to have children, just like Yitzchak prayed for Rivkah. However, Yaakov admonished Rachel for implying that a tzaddik has the power to coerce Hashem.

This was obviously a very emotive issue and a difficult time. However, the Midrash teaches us that Hashem was not happy with Yaakov's response:

*Hashem said to him [Yaakov], "Is that the way to answer someone who is aggrieved? By your life,<sup>11</sup> your children [from your other wives] will stand humbly before her son [Yosef]"*

Yaakov's response was 100% accurate and truthful. He was *not* in the place of Hashem. However, his reply was not as sensitive to Rachel's feelings as it could have been. It seems from the Midrash that the ramifications of this comment passed down to the next generation and were a contributing cause to the sibling rivalry that plagued Yaakov's children.

As we explained above, we can't point to one cause for the slavery in Mitzrayim – there were multiple causes, and ultimately it happened simply because it was Hashem's will. But we may have here another piece of the puzzle. The most proximate cause of the descent to slavery was the jealousy between the brothers, but that jealousy may have been, at least partially, fuelled by some friction between husband and wife.

Each of the possible causes that we mentioned above can teach us an important lesson. The brothers teach us about the dangers of jealousy and sibling rivalry. Avraham teaches us about the importance of perfecting our faith. And the incident between Yaakov and Rachel in our Parasha demonstrates that even small comments and a loss of temper can have very significant consequences. We can therefore consider this lesson as an incentive to work even harder at controlling our tongue and our reactions.

Let's try something this week:

1. Remember that even a slight insensitivity to another person's feelings can have enormous flow on effects, even in later generations.
2. Even if we are 100% in the right, we still need to be careful in how we speak to others. This can be extra challenging when emotions are charged – but it is worth making the effort.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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<sup>8</sup> Parashat Lech Lecha, Breishit 14:21.

<sup>9</sup> Parashat Vayera, Breishit 21:22-30.

<sup>10</sup> Rashi explains, based on the Midrash (Breishit Rabbah 71:5) that Rachel was envious of Leah's good deeds through which Leah merited to have children.

<sup>11</sup> This is a form of oath.