

DARCHAI NOAM

Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Vayigash, November 2013

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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Vayigash – Smile and become happy!

In this week's Parasha of Vayigash, Yaakov is finally reunited with his beloved son Yosef. After an emotional reunion, Yosef introduces his elderly father to his boss, Pharaoh. This is no ordinary meeting. Pharaoh is the leader of the world superpower. Yaakov is the father of the Jewish people. What would we expect the primary topic of discussion to be?

When David Ben Gurion met with Albert Einstein in 1951, they discussed such weighty issues as the existence of G-d, freedom, relativity and philosophy. The subject matter of the conversation between Pharaoh and Yaakov seems comparatively mundane (Breishit 47:8-9):

Pharaoh said to Yaakov: "How many are the days of the years of your life?"

And Yaakov said to Pharaoh: "The days of the years of my sojournings are one hundred and thirty years. The days of the years of my life have been few and bad, and they have not reached the days of the years of the lives of my forefathers in the days of their sojournings."

Pharaoh asks Yaakov how old he is and Yaakov whinges about how miserable his life has been.

According to the Midrash, the Avot were all supposed to live until 180 years. Only Yitzchak made it. Avraham died at the age of 175. Hashem shortened his life by 5 years so that he should not suffer the anguish of seeing his grandson Eisav start to live an evil life (Rashi on Breishit 25:30). Yaakov only lived until the age of 147. The Midrash explains that Yaakov lost 33 years as a punishment for the 33 words that were used to complain to Pharaoh about his life.

This Midrash needs to be explained¹. Yaakov's response to Pharaoh consists of only 25 words! To get to 33 words we need to add Pharaoh's question, including the words "Pharaoh said to Yaakov". We can understand why someone of Yaakov's stature is punished for describing his life in negative terms. But why should Yaakov be punished for Pharaoh's question?

In his commentary on the Torah, the Ramban notes that it is unusual for two world leaders to engage in such a mundane conversation. The Ramban explains that Yaakov looked extremely old and worn. Therefore Pharaoh dispensed with the usual diplomatic protocol to inquire after Yaakov's age. Yaakov then explained to Pharaoh why he appeared much older than his actual age.

Had Yaakov weathered his suffering with a more cheerful disposition, he would not have appeared to Pharaoh to be so remarkably old. In that case, Pharaoh would not have been prompted to ask his question and Yaakov would not have needed to respond negatively.

But is it fair to blame Yaakov? The 17 years that he was about to spend in Mitzrayim was going to be the best time of his life. However until this point in his life Yaakov has been suffering one challenge after another:

¹ This explanation comes from Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz (1902-1979), the Rosh Yeshiva of the Mirrer Yeshiva.

- deceiving his father to obtain the brachot;
- running from his brother who had vowed to kill him;
- being robbed and left penniless by his nephew;
- marrying the wrong woman;
- working for many years for his corrupt father-in-law;
- facing his brother with 400 soldiers;
- enduring the kidnap and rape of his daughter;
- being separated from his mother for more than 30 years and then not seeing her before her death; and
- enduring the separation and presumed death of his beloved son Yosef for more than 20 years.

However, despite these objectively valid reasons for looking old and worn out, Yaakov was still punished for his appearance and his complaint. Yaakov had reached such a high level of righteousness that he was judged on a totally different level than we are. If we were to suffer even a fraction of what Yaakov suffered we would surely be forgiven for appearing worn and depressed. But what can we learn from this story?

We can learn the importance of putting on a happy face and smiling. As mentioned a couple of weeks ago in Darchai Noam (see Parashat Vayeshev), Shammai teaches us that we should greet everyone with a cheerful face (Pirkei Avot 1:15). This doesn't mean that we should walk around with a fake smile constantly plastered on our face or that we should ignore genuine issues and problems in our lives. It is often appropriate and even healthy to be sad and to express that feeling at the time. But, we do risk getting caught in a rut and allowing ourselves to wallow in a negative frame of mind for longer than necessary. According to Dennis Prager in "Happiness is a Serious Problem", self-pity is often addictive and more tempting to indulge in than happiness. We can get so enmeshed in our own problems that we walk down the street with a perpetually miserable face.

So, it seems that the Torah is teaching us to actively create a happy exterior. This can be hard work. For inspiration to help us be cheerful, we should remind ourselves that we are blessed with life! We often take this for granted but life is an amazing gift from Hashem. It is the opportunity for us to earn our eternal reward in the world to come. And every, single other thing we have in this life of ours is also a precious gift that we can focus on and marvel over with enthusiasm.

Putting on a smile has many important benefits, including:

1. When we greet other people with a smile, we can cheer them up and turn their whole day around.
2. If we are feeling a bit grumpy, the simple act of smiling on the outside can often cheer us up on the inside.

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to notice our feelings and recognise when we are feeling a bit down.
2. Actively accept that our life is exactly how Hashem wants it to be at this moment.
3. Deliberately adopt a happy face and greet other people with a smile, whether or not we truly feel it.
4. Redirect our thoughts and feelings by adopting a 'gratitude attitude' and focusing on every little thing that has gone right or we have been gifted with up until this point in our life.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Allon Ledder

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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'reiacha kamocho' – loving one's fellow as oneself.

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