

DARCHAI NOAM**Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם**

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Vayishlach, November 2013

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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Vayishlach – Positive and negative influences

This week's Parasha of Vayishlach raises two separate ideas that seem to be inconsistent with each other.

Protecting ourselves from negative influences

Yaakov finally meets his brother Eisav after being apart for more than 30 years. The last time they had been together Eisav had sworn to kill Yaakov as revenge for Yaakov stealing the brachah. Yaakov prepares himself in three ways – he prays to Hashem, he sends a tribute to Eisav and he prepares himself for battle.

Despite the dramatic build-up, the encounter seems to go surprisingly well. Eisav runs up to Yaakov and with tears in his eyes he hugs and kisses him. The commentators disagree as to Eisav's true intentions, but at least on the surface it appears that Eisav's anger has dissipated. Eisav offers to travel together with Yaakov, or to leave some of his men to help Yaakov and his family. Yaakov knows that Eisav and his men are truly evil. He refuses Eisav's offers of assistance, politely but firmly. Yaakov's young family will form the Jewish people and he cannot expose them to any potentially negative influences.

The Torah instructs us in a number of places to be careful of who our neighbours are and the people whose company we keep. This is because we will be subject to peer pressure and we may become influenced by the values of those around us. See the following sources: Tehillim 1:1; Mishlei 13:20; Pirkei Avot 1:7 and 2:14; Rambam in Hilchot Deot 6:1; Rashi to Bamidbar 16:1 and Rashi to Bamidbar 3:38.

Even if we and our whole family can manage to stay strong and avoid being influenced by those around us with different values, just placing ourselves in such a situation can sap us of energy. It can take a lot of will power and strength to stay firm to our beliefs in the face of adversity. The emotional and mental energy that would be needed to deflect negative influences would be better used if it was directed towards self-growth and strengthening our relationship with Hashem.

Some people take the view that it is appropriate to insulate ourselves and minimise any exposure to outside influences as much as possible. But for most of us this is not realistic. However we should all try to be a bit more aware of the influences that are allowed into our homes and into our heads (eg through TV programs, movies, internet, magazines). If we have children in our home, we need to remember that, just like Yaakov's children, those children are the future of the Jewish people. If we are at least aware of the issue we can certainly take some steps to minimise our exposure to negative influences.

Positively influencing others

Straight after the encounter with Eisav, we read about the tragedy of Yaakov's daughter Dina who is kidnapped and assaulted by Shechem. Rashi (Breishit 32:23) brings an amazing Midrash that says that the incident with Dinah and Shechem was actually a punishment for Yaakov. When Yaakov was about to meet Eisav, he hid Dinah in a chest so that Eisav wouldn't see her and want her. However, according to the Midrash, Dinah would have been a positive influence on Eisav and could have caused him to improve his ways. According to the Midrash, Yaakov was punished for withholding Dina from Eisav.

Based on this Midrash it would seem that Yaakov is being held accountable for a very natural parental action. Most fathers would try to prevent their child from marrying someone that they knew was inherently evil. Some commentators have suggested that Yaakov was actually correct in hiding Dinah, however his error was that he should have at least felt a bit remorseful that Eisav was missing out on a chance to be influenced positively.

This Midrash raises an important point. As Jews we have an obligation to positively influence those around us. As Hashem's chosen people, we have an obligation to be a light unto the nations (Isaiah 42:6). We also have an obligation to do kiruv – to reach out to our fellow Jews who have become disconnected from Judaism and encourage them to return to the correct path.

The contradiction

Though emerging from the same Parasha, the above ideas raise a contradiction. On the one hand, we should try to avoid negative influences from others whose values we do not share. On the other hand we should try to be a positive influence to others. However this is problematic. When we reach out to others, in an attempt to be a positive influence, we are exposing ourselves to possible negative influences. How can we protect ourselves from being influenced in a negative way? This is a very difficult issue, which involves constant assessment and adjustment. It is a balancing act and there are no simple answers. We need to look within to our own family and take into account factors such as how strong are our beliefs and how strong is the impact of the people that we are trying to influence. The starting point is to be aware of the issues. That way we will at least have a chance of successfully walking the tightrope.

Let's try something this week:

1. Pay attention to the inappropriate temptations and negative influences that our family is currently being exposed to.
2. Try to minimise these negative exposures as much as possible.
3. Look out for opportunities to be a positive example to other people, but without exposing our family to undesirable influences in the process.

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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