

## DARCHAI NOAM

### Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם

(Mishlei 3:17)

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

### Vayishlach – what’s in a name?

In this week’s Parsha of Vayishlach we read about the enigmatic night-time battle between Yaakov and the mysterious “man”. Let’s summarise the context of this battle.

Yaakov is on his way to meet Eisav after being apart for 22 years. The last time that they met was when Yaakov “stole” the Brachot from their father Yitzchak. Eisav swore to kill Yaakov in revenge. Yaakov left and travelled to Lavan’s house, penniless and alone. He was now returning with a large family and many possessions.

Yaakov knows that Eisav is approaching with 400 soldiers. Understandably concerned, Yaakov divides his people and his flocks into two camps and brings them across the Jabbok River. He then returns by himself across the river to retrieve some of his possessions that he had left behind. The battle with the mysterious “man” takes place while he was on the other side of the river.

*“And Yaakov was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn”*  
(Breishit 32:25)

Rashi explains that this mysterious man was actually the guardian angel of Eisav.

After the battle, the angel changes Yaakov’s name to Israel and blesses him. The Torah then records a very strange conversation:

*“Then Yaakov inquired and he said “Now tell me your name”. And he [the angel] said “Why do you ask my name?” And he [the angel] blessed him [Yaakov] there.”* (Breishit 32:30)

It seems strange that the Torah records Yaakov’s question about the angel’s name and yet it does not reveal the answer to the question. The Torah doesn’t record information unless it is significant. If it is important for us to know the name of the angel, then the Torah should tell us the name. If it is not important for us to know the angel’s name then the Torah should not have recorded this conversation at all. And why does the angel answer Yaakov’s question by asking Yaakov why he asked for his name?

By delving into the significance of a person’s name we may shed some light on the meaning of this enigmatic conversation<sup>1</sup>. It is a well-known idea in Jewish thought that a person’s name represents their essence. Chazal teach us that when parents choose a name for their child, they are granted a small measure of prophecy. This ensures that the child is given the appropriate name. Kabbalists and great Tzaddikim can often understand the essence of a person just by knowing their name.

Rabbi Akiva Tatz explains this concept as follows. The Hebrew word for “name” is “shem” (שם). This is almost identical to the Hebrew word for “there” (“sham”).<sup>2</sup> The concept of “there” is related to our destiny, the direction towards which we are headed. Right now, we are “here”. In the future, we will be “over there”. Our name reveals the direction towards which we are headed, our destiny or our destination. Like our tafkid (divine purpose in life) it is something that we need to complete or reach in order to be fulfilled and achieve our purpose. That is why our name reveals our essence.

Yaakov knew that he was battling with Eisav’s guardian angel. Yaakov also knew that the longest and most bitter exile of his descendants (i.e. the Jewish people) would emanate from Eisav. Eisav was the

<sup>1</sup> This suggestion for the meaning behind the conversation is based on an idea that I read many years ago. Unfortunately I do not remember the source.

<sup>2</sup> The letters are the same, only the vowel is different.

ancestor of Rome<sup>3</sup> and the Romans were responsible for destroying the second Bet Hamikdash and taking the Jewish people into exile, an exile in which we still find ourselves today, almost 2,000 years later. The Roman Empire itself no longer exists but it has been taken over by the modern, Western, secular world.

The best way for someone to overcome their enemy is to understand their enemy. One generally needs to know their opponent's weaknesses in order to be victorious. Yaakov understood that a name represents the essence. Perhaps this is why Yaakov wanted to know the name of Eisav's guardian angel. He wanted a clue as to Eisav's essence in order to reveal how best to combat this opponent. Similarly, if we understand our current enemies and the essence of our exile (galut) then perhaps we would know how best to combat and put an end to this long and bitter exile.<sup>4</sup>

So how can we understand the angel's strange answer to Yaakov?

The modern, secular world (which is the spiritual inheritor of the Roman Empire) does not have much substance to it. It is a world focused on superficialities where celebrities and materialism are worshipped. It is a world in which people constantly chase after the latest fad or fashion – meaningless trends that change at a whim.

When Yaakov asks the angel for his name, he is asking the angel to reveal the essence of Eisav (or in other words, Rome and the modern secular world). But there is no essence! It's all meaningless! Perhaps that is why the angel merely replies "Why do you ask my name?" It is as if the angel is saying: "Why are you asking me what my essence is? What does essence mean? I don't really understand the question!"

We can now understand the deeper significance of this mysterious conversation. The Torah is revealing to us what we are facing in this exile – an emptiness which lacks essence; a place without a destination. Though the glitz and glamour of the Western material world may be tempting, we need to remember that we have a higher calling. Our role is to develop our connection with Hashem and to teach the world about Hashem's existence and the proper way to act. We can accomplish this by keeping the mitzvot and being positive role models. That way we will sanctify and elevate this world and ensure that we have a permanent dwelling place in the world to come – which is our true destiny.

Let's try something this week:

1. We need to interact with the world around us, but try not to get too drawn in. Keep in mind what our true role is in this world. We need to elevate this world by attaching our actions to something meaningful and permanent – that is, Hashem and the world to come.
2. Remember that the entertainment and relaxation options that the world offers us are not an end in themselves. Rather, their purpose is to recharge our batteries in order to enable us to continue to serve Hashem.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Ledder.

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<sup>3</sup> See Rashi to Breishit 36:43 where Rashi identifies Eisav's descendant 'Magdiel' as the founder of Rome. See also Rashi to Breishit 27:39 where he explains that Yitzchak's bracha to Eisav includes Italy. See also Rashi to Breishit 25:23 which explains that the two great nations that will come from Rivkah are Rome and the Jewish people.

<sup>4</sup> Most of the exile has been very harsh. It is true that today the exile is often quite physically comfortable for many of us. But it is still exile. And it will continue to be exile until the times of the Moshiach and the rebuilding of the Bet Hamikdash.

## **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 that usually relates 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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