

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Vayishlach, December 2016

darchai.noam@gmail.com

How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Vayishlach – taking the focus off ourselves

In this week's Parsha of Vayishlach we read about the enigmatic night-time battle between Yaakov and a mysterious “man”. This occurred when Yaakov was on his way to meet Eisav after not having seen him for 22 years. The last time the brothers had met was when Yaakov “stole” the Brachot from their father Yitzchak and Eisav had sworn to kill Yaakov in revenge. Eisav is now approaching Yaakov with 400 soldiers. Yaakov is understandably concerned. Yaakov brings his camp across the Jabbok River and then returns by himself across the river to retrieve some possessions. The battle with a mysterious “man” takes place while he is alone 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 the mysterious “man” was actually the guardian angel of Eisav. After the battle, the Torah records a very enigmatic conversation between Yaakov and the angel:

“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)

In last year's Darchai Noam on Parshat Vayishlach, we discussed a possible explanation for this enigmatic conversation¹. We explained that a person's name represents their essence. Yaakov was seeking to understand the man's essence because he understood that the “man” he was battling with was actually Eisav's guardian angel. Yaakov also knew that the longest and most bitter exile of the Jewish people would emanate from Eisav. Eisav was the ancestor of Rome.² 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. Though the Roman Empire itself no longer exists, it has been replaced by the modern, Western, secular world.

Yaakov sought to understand the guardian angel's essence because he realised that the most effective strategy for overcoming ones enemy is to understand them. One needs to know their opponent's weaknesses in order to be victorious. Yaakov wanted a clue as to Eisav's essence in order to reveal how Bnei Yisrael would be best able to combat this opponent.

The modern, secular world (which is the spiritual inheritor of the Roman Empire) does not have much substance to it. Most of the distractions that we face from the modern world and which vie for our attention are really quite meaningless. 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 the angel merely replies “Why do you ask my name?” This suggests that he doesn't really understand the question because he (representing Western civilisation) has no essence!

¹ See last year's Darchai Noam for a more in-depth discussion of this idea. 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.

² 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.

We can now understand the deeper significance of this mysterious conversation. We learn that the Roman exile is an emptiness which lacks essence. 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.

Perhaps another lesson we can learn from Yaakov's discussion is that he had the presence of mind and consideration to be thinking about how to help Bnei Yisrael overcome the Roman exile. Yaakov was alone and hurt. It was dark and he was separated from his family. He was concerned for his life and his upcoming meeting with Eisav and his 400 soldiers. Yet rather than just thinking about himself, this conversation reveals that he was concerned primarily about his descendants and the exile they would suffer more than 1,500 years later!

As we are made first with a *guf* (body) that is egocentric, we naturally tend to focus on ourselves and our own issues. It takes effort to shift that focus to others. The following story about a *Gadol Hador* (a giant of the Jewish people) of the previous generation reveals another telling example of true *Ahavat Yisrael*.³

*Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach called his grandson one Erev Pesach and told him that he needed some urgent help. His grandson was busy burning the chametz and taking care of his other pre-Pesach duties on this very busy day. As soon as he finished burning the chametz he raced to his grandfather's place to see what was so urgent. Rav Shlomo handed him some envelopes and asked him to deliver them to some of the poor families in the neighbourhood. "But Saba", his grandson protested, "It's already Erev Pesach! All of the tzedaka has already been delivered and people have already obtained their matza and other needs for the seder". However Rav Auerbach insisted. His grandson of course carried out the wishes of his holy grandfather. He watched as each recipient opened the envelope to find a small sum of money and tickets to the Jerusalem Biblical Zoo. His grandson later asked him why this task could not have waited until Chol Hamoed. Rav Auerbach explained that Chol Hamoed in Israel is traditionally a time for family outings. The young children at shule on Yom Tov often talk about where they would be going that year. Children from poor families may feel left out if they had no plans. That is why it was so important that the tickets be delivered **before** Yom Tov. Rav Auerbach wanted the children to be able to look forward to their plans to visit the zoo – a popular destination during Chol Hamoed – and not feel excluded. He was sensitive to the children's feelings and also responsive to the needs of the parents to feel that they were providing for their families.*

While everyone was immersed in last minute preparations for Pesach, Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach was thinking about the poor children of his neighbourhood and doing whatever he could to make sure that they too enjoyed the festival. This is the special sensitivity and *Ahavat Yisrael* that epitomises a *Gadol Hador*.

In times of stress and worry it is natural to focus inwards on our own needs. Yet, as descendants of Yaakov we too can act supernaturally and extend beyond ourselves in order to think of others.

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to emulate Yaakov and Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach and go the extra mile to consider other people's unique needs.
2. Especially when times are difficult or busy, and it is tempting to become wrapped up in ourselves, it is important and beneficial to think about the *klal* (community).

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

³ Heard from Rav Michael Yammer, Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Sha'alvim and a student of Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach.

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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're'echa kamocho' – loving one's fellow as oneself.

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