

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Vayishlach
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darchai.noam@gmail.com
www.darchai-noam.com

How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Vayishlach – “I have everything”

In this week's Parsha of Vayishlach we read about Yaakov's reunion with Eisav. The last time they had seen each other, Eisav had wanted to kill Yaakov. Eisav had been furious about the fact that Yaacov had “stolen” the brachot that he believed rightfully belonged to him. After many years, Yaacov was returning home to the Land of Canaan with his large family. He knew that Eisav was on his way to meet him, together with 400 armed men. Yaakov feared that Eisav still wanted to kill him.

Before they met in person, Yaakov sent ahead many animals as a generous gift to Eisav. He commanded his servants to make a space between each herd in order to maximise the positive impact on Eisav. As each herd arrived, Yaakov hoped that Eisav would feel more kindly towards him and that his negative feelings would soften. In this manner, Yaakov was hoping for the following:

“I will appease his anger with the gift that is going before me, and afterwards I will see his face, perhaps he will favour me.” (Breishit 32:21)

The meeting went better than Yaakov had expected. The two brothers kissed each other and wept (although the commentators are divided as to whether Eisav's display of emotion was genuine). The conversation eventually turned to the large gift that Yaakov had sent to Eisav. At first, Eisav did not want to accept the gift:

“And Eisav said, “I have plenty my brother; let what you have remain yours”.

“And Yaakov said, “Please no! If I have found favour in your eyes, then you shall take my gift from my hand... because I have everything” (Breishit 33:9-11)

Eisav eventually agreed to take the gift.

Let's examine the different ways that the brothers described their lot. Eisav claimed that he didn't need the gift because he already had *plenty*. But Yaakov insisted that it was better for Eisav to accept the gift because he, Yaakov, had *everything*. In his commentary, Rashi¹ points out that Yaakov was not referring to a physical amount of material wealth, but rather to the fact that all his needs were being taken care of. He understood that he always had “everything” i.e. everything that he needed. On the other hand, Eisav was more focussed on the material and the physical. Eisav was speaking purely in terms of how much wealth he had. Rashi explains that Eisav was speaking in a haughty manner. He was pointing out to Yaakov that he has plenty, meaning much more than he needs.

There is a very well-known teaching from Pirkai Avot:

*“Who is rich? One who is satisfied with his lot”.*²

We may know this to be true intellectually. But many of us struggle to really feel its truth in our hearts. How many people are truly happy with their lot to the extent that they don't wish for anything else?

We learn in Kohelet:

“He who loves money will not be satisfied with money”. (Kohelet 5:1)

The Midrash on this phrase tells us that one who has 100, wants 200. And one who has 200, wants 400. In other words, people are rarely satisfied with their financial status.

¹ Commentary to Breishit 33:11, based on the Midrash (Tanchuma Vayishlach 3)

² Pirkai Avot, Chapter 4, Mishnah 1, in the name of Ben Zoma.

Perhaps we can derive some chizuk by examining some words in the Hebrew language.

The Shulchan Aruch rules that one can satisfy their obligation to recite the Shema in any language.³ The same applies to Birkat Hamazon, prayer, brachot, Hallel etc. The Mishnah Berurah writes that it is far better to recite these prayers and brachot in Hebrew, even if one does not understand the language. On the other hand, reciting them in another language would only be effective if one understood that language. Why is there such a distinction between praying in Hebrew and praying in another language? The Biur Halacha⁴ explains that all other languages are just arbitrary. Words have a particular meaning only because people decided that they do so. On the other hand, Hebrew is “Lashon Hakodesh” (the holy language). The letters of the Hebrew alphabet represent spiritual forces and Hashem used combinations of these letters to create the world. When we call a dog ‘כלב’ (kelev) we mean that the essence of a dog is represented by those 3 letters. In fact, the word כלב can also mean כ לב (“like a heart”) because the essence of a dog is to be loyal and to endear itself to its master’s heart.⁵

We can therefore obtain a deep insight into the essence of something by examining the Hebrew name for that thing. Let’s see some examples.

- The Hebrew word כסף (kesef) means silver or money. However, what does this word really mean? Have a look at the famous song Yedid Nefesh.⁶ The theme of this song is the intense love that one must feel for Hashem. The 3rd verse contains the doubled-words “נכסף נכספתי” (Nichsof Nicholsafti) which has the same root as the word כסף. These words are translated as “intense yearning”. So, we see that the essence of money is that it is something that we yearn intensely for!
- In a similar vein, the Hebrew word for a generic object is חפץ (chafetz). What does this word really mean? The renowned Chafetz Chaim⁷ is named after a phrase in Tehillim Chapter 34.⁸ The pasuk states “מי האיש – ההפץ חיים” – “Who is the man that *desires* life”. We see that the Hebrew word for an “object” means “desire”. From here we can understand the essence of an object – it is something that is desired.
- The Ramban⁹ points out that the Torah sometimes uses the word “מלאכה” (melacha) to describe money or possessions. The word מלאכה also means work. This teaches us that owning possessions is hard work! They demand our time and attention to maintain and upkeep them. The more possessions that we have, the more work that we need to do just to look after them.

Eisav looked at what he had in a superficial manner. He focussed purely on the face value of the objects he owned and the wealth he had amassed. This is perhaps why Yaakov’s clever ‘bribe’ worked. Eisav’s mood was intricately connected to the amount he owned, so by plying him with extra wealth his emotional barometer was raised. To Eisav, wealth equated to love and happiness. In contrast, Yaakov saw the deeper spiritual side of his possessions and his life. His focus was on emunah in Hashem. Therefore, he always had, and always would have, everything. Because Hashem ensured that he did. The animals that Yaakov gave away would not impact his true wealth as spiritual wealth and emunah is much deeper than superficial financial status.

If we can change our perception of the meaning and function of money and possessions, we too, like Yaakov, can have everything.

Let’s try something this week:

1. Think about how we relate to our possessions. Is it more of a Yaakov or an Eisav perspective?
2. Try to detach a little from the physical, material world and remind ourselves over and over again that Hashem is in charge of our needs and will satisfy them in the best way.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

³ Orach Chaim 62:2. Note this leniency should only be relied upon if one is not able to read in Hebrew. Also, one should consult their Rabbi as to when and how one can use another language for prayer.

⁴ Written by the Chofetz Chaim, who was also the author of the Mishnah Berurah (see footnote 7 below).

⁵ There is infinitely more depth to the Hebrew letters than this simple example, but it is beyond the scope of this article (and beyond my understanding!)

⁶ We traditionally sing this song at the beginning of Kabbalat Shabbat and at the end of Shabbat during Seudah Shlishit. See page 590 of the standard Artscroll Ashkenazi siddur.

⁷ Rabbi Yisrael Meir (HaKohen) Kagan (1839 – 1933). He is called after the name of his famous work, “Chofetz Chaim” on the laws of lashon hara. He authored numerous other works, including the Mishnah Berurah.

⁸ We recite this Chapter of Tehillim during Pesukai D’Zimrah on Shabbat morning. See page 376 of the standard Artscroll Ashkenazi siddur.

⁹ In his commentary to Sefer Shemot, Parshat Vayakhel 36:6.

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The pasuk 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, usually 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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