

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Vayishlach
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Vayishlach – Keeping your word

In this week's Parsha of Vayishlach, Yaakov finally returns to the land of Canaan and experiences a fateful reunion with his brother Eisav. Yaakov spends 18 months in Sukkot and then travels to the city of Shechem, where he buys a field. Yaakov's daughter Dinah is then kidnapped by Shechem. After Dinah is returned, Hashem appears to Yaakov instructing him to go to Bet El and to make an altar to Hashem.

Rashi brings a very harsh comment against Yaakov, from the Midrash Tanchuma:

*“Arise and go up [to Bet El]. Because you delayed on the way you were punished and this trouble with your daughter has occurred”.*¹

According to Rashi, Yaakov's trouble with Dinah is a punishment because he delayed. More than 20 years earlier, as Yaakov was fleeing from his brother and on his way to Lavan's house, he stopped for the night and had his famous dream about the ladder with the angels ascending and descending (see the beginning of last week's Parsha). Hashem appeared to Yaakov and promised him the land, numerous descendants and protection from Eisav and Lavan. Yaakov named this place Bet El and vowed that if he would return in peace, he would donate 10% of his earnings as tzedakah and make an altar to Hashem in that place.

When Yaakov returned to the land of Canaan after so many years, he was finally in a position to fulfil his vow and make an altar to Hashem. He should have done so immediately, but he tarried and Hashem had to remind him. For that he was punished. (As an aside, it must be noted that the Torah often highlights shortfalls of great people in order to teach us the appropriate lessons. Also, tzaddikim are often judged very strictly as they are on a much higher level.)

From this incident we can learn the importance of following through with what we say we will do and doing it as soon as possible. In some cases, we are governed by strict halacha. For example, if someone promises to bring a korban, they must do so before 3 of the regalim (pilgrimage festivals) have passed.² If someone vows to give tzedakah, they must do so immediately. If there are no poor people nearby, then they must give the tzedakah as soon as they have the opportunity to do so.³

However, even if there is no strict halacha governing our circumstances, we should do what we say we will do as soon as we can. One reason to do so is because others are relying on us. Another reason is that if we don't, then there is a risk that we will forget or otherwise be prevented from fulfilling our word.

Consider the following true stories:

Rabbi Cohen was forced to travel to a distant town one Pesach and he was invited to someone's house for a meal⁴. Rabbi Cohen was very particular about his kashrut on Pesach and he kept a number of chumrot (stringencies). His host was known to be equally strict so Rabbi Cohen was confident that he could eat there. As he was sitting at the table and about to be served, he noticed something that suggested that his host was less strict than he had been led to believe. Rabbi Cohen didn't know what to do. On the one hand, he did not want to compromise his chumrot. On the other hand, he couldn't bear to embarrass his host. Then he had a brain wave.

¹ Rashi's commentary to Breishit 35:1.

² Gemara Rosh Hashanah 6a.

³ Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah 257:3.

⁴ This story is based on a true story that was told to me about a friend's Rabbi who lives in Eretz Yisrael. The friend and the Rabbi will remain anonymous.

Some people have the custom not to eat gebrochts⁵ on Pesach. This is a very well-known custom and it restricts people from eating at the home of someone who does not follow the custom. Rabbi Cohen did not have the custom to refrain from eating gebrochts. In fact, he really enjoyed his matza ball soup and his matza brei. Sometimes, as a treat, he would make himself matza pizza. (His mouth watered just thinking about it!) He apologised to the host and said that he had forgotten to tell them that he does not eat gebrochts. He was thus able to avoid eating most of the food at the meal without embarrassing his host. Since he had publicly proclaimed that he did not eat gebrochts, he decided to keep this custom from then on. For the rest of his life he never ate gebrochts on Pesach again.

Rabbi Aryeh Levine was known as a saintly individual⁶. He was born in Russia and then lived in Eretz Yisrael until he passed away in 1969. Someone once claimed that Rabbi Levine had guaranteed his loan and when he couldn't repay it, he demanded that the Rabbi repay the loan. He provided as evidence a document that appeared to be signed by Rabbi Levine himself. However, Rabbi Levine had proof that the document was a forgery. Whenever Rabbi Levine signed his name, he was always careful to place a dash between the letters "Yud" and "Heh" of his first name so as to avoid writing part of Hashem's name. There was no such dash on the signature on this document. However, Rabbi Levine knew that if he refused to pay, people might suspect that he had broken his word and perhaps learn that it is okay to do so. So Rabbi Levine kept quiet. He agreed to repay the loan. He made repayments every month for a number of years until the loan was fully repaid.

On a practical level, let's consider the case of Yehuda and explore how this concept can relate to us:

Yehuda has a 4-year-old son. Like many 4-year-olds, was constantly asking for something and demanding his father's attention. When Yehuda said "No" his son would often throw a temper tantrum. To buy himself some peace and quiet, and to avoid saying "No", Yehuda discovered a method that seemed to work quite well. When his son asked for something that Yehuda couldn't provide, he would just say "Soon" or "Later" or "Yes, but not just now". This often kept his son happy in the short term. Inevitably, his son would become distracted and forget all about his request and Yehuda would be off the hook! Yehuda's trick worked with other people as well. He got into the habit of just saying "Yes" or "Soon" because that was the easy way out. But he often did not follow through on his word. Later, he found he could come up with some excuse to extricate himself from whatever he promised.

By not keeping his word, Yehuda was teaching his son that the words we say are not important.⁷ However, the Torah deems our words extremely important. If one makes a vow or an oath his words take on the status a Torah prohibition.

We must use our words appropriately and then stand by them. Some people have difficulty saying no. But if the answer is no, they then need to be brave enough to say it. If we're genuinely not sure what the answer is, then we need to get used to saying things like "We'll see" or "Maybe" or "I'm not sure" or "Ask me again later". Another good habit to adopt is to say "bli neder". This means "I will try but I can't guarantee it".⁸

Let's try something this week:

1. Pay attention to the times we say that we will do something. Do we really mean it? Are we confident that we can keep our word? Try to avoid assuring people that we will do something unless we are confident that we can do it.
2. Take utmost care to remember and respect our word.
3. If we are unsure about being able to follow through, try to add terms like "bli neder" to indicate to others that our assurance is not a promise.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁵ Matza that has come in contact with water.

⁶ This story was published in "A Tzaddik in our Time" by Simcha Raz.

⁷ As an aside, this tool can be an excellent technique to use when dealing with the demands of our own yetzer hara. But that is a separate topic for another time.

⁸ Of course, saying "bli neder" is not a get out of jail free card! You should only say that you will do something if you will genuinely try to do so.