

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Chayai Sarah
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Parashat Chaiya Sarah – The foolish trade off

In this week’s parsha, we read about the death and burial of Sarah. Despite being promised the land of Israel as an inheritance, Avraham has to pay an exorbitant sum of money to buy Sarah’s burial plot.

As an interesting aside, there are three examples where parcels of land were bought in Israel for the Jewish people for very high sums and the transaction was clearly recorded – Yerushalayim (by David haMelech), Hevron (by Avraham in our Parasha) and Shechem (by Yaakov). Historically, these three parcels of land have been the most challenged by our enemies.

Avraham wishes to bury Sarah in Ephron’s cave. Ephron seems to be magnanimous, suggesting that he wishes to give the cave to Avraham as a gift. However, his real intention is to sell it for a highly inflated price. As a punishment, a letter is taken from Ephron’s name. Throughout this portion, Ephron’s name is spelt with the letter vav (אפרון) but after he takes the money from Avraham, his name is spelt without the letter vav (אפרן)¹.

What does it mean to be missing a letter of your name? No-one likes to see their name spelt incorrectly. (I remember as a first-year lawyer I made the unforgiveable mistake of misspelling a client’s name in an email. I happened to be walking past the partner’s office while he was talking to the client on loudspeaker and the client was complaining bitterly that “he didn’t even spell my name correctly”. I never made that mistake again!) But consider having your name missing a letter for all eternity in the holy Torah? We can’t even begin to imagine the distress that would cause in Olam Haba. Perhaps it might be comparable to missing a limb in this world?

This raises the question of whether it is worth trading material success in this world for a reduced reward in the World to Come? The Gemara² deals with this issue in reference to the righteous Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa who was used to performing miracles but lived in abject poverty.

Rabbi Chanina’s wife said to him: “Until when will we continue to suffer this poverty?” He said to her: “What can we do?” She responded: “Pray for mercy that something will be given to you from Heaven”. Rabbi Chanina prayed for mercy and a hand emerged from heaven and gave him one leg of a golden table. That night, his wife saw in a dream that in the World to Come, the righteous will eat at a golden table that has three legs, but she and her family will be eating on a table that has two legs.³ When she told her husband this story, he said to her: “Would you be happy that everyone else eats at a complete table in the World to Come while we will be eating at a defective table?” She said to him: “But what can we do? Pray for mercy, that the leg of the golden table should be taken from you.” He prayed for mercy, and it was taken from him. A Tana

¹ Breishit 23:6.

² Taanit 25a.

³ Incidentally, a three-legged table is more stable than a four-legged table! It is impossible for a three-legged table to wobble, even if one leg is shorter than the others. Think about it...

taught in a Baraita: The last miracle was greater than the first, as it is learned as a tradition that Heaven gives but does not take back.

Consider the following parable.

Reuven was one of the lucky ones. He managed to book a ticket for a boat to America before the Second World War. He took his life savings with him, and he managed to obtain a job as a menial worker on the large ship to defray the cost of the ticket. The route was circuitous and included many stops. It would be a long three-month journey from Europe to the United States. Reuven liked to plan for the future. He worked out how much he would need to buy some merchandise in America and set up a small business. There would be enough money left over to rent a small apartment. If he worked hard during the journey, and saved all his pennies, he should have just enough to make it in the new land. The first day of the trip was very difficult. The work was backbreaking, and Reuven discovered that his 'bed' was just a corner of the deck.

Reuven soon discovered that by paying the right person a small sum he could sleep in more comfortable quarters. He thought about it carefully and decided that it was worth it. As he got used to the comfort of his new cabin, he started to think that maybe it wasn't necessary to continue working so hard. After all, he needed to conserve his strength for the challenging time ahead in the US. When Reuven gave up his job, he had more time on his hands. He started to notice the wealthier passengers with envy. They slept in very comfortable cabins and enjoyed gourmet food and all of the pleasurable pastimes that the ship offered. Reuven gradually spent more and more of his money to climb up the social ladder on the ship. By the end of the journey, he was really enjoying his time, hobnobbing with the rich and famous and enjoying the good life. His old working-class friends were jealous, and he was loving it.

But then he reached his destination, without a penny to his name...

The parable about Reuven is an extreme case. But the applicability to our own lives should be clear. We do need to be comfortable in this world. We need to make a living and we have some basic needs that must be met – food clothing and shelter. We even need some extra luxuries and pleasures from time to time, to keep us sane. But we have to be aware of the risk of trading eternal reward in the World to Come for some temporary pleasures in this world. If our effort to acquire luxuries comes at the cost of time spent learning Torah or doing mitzvot, we will pay the price for this in the World to Come. Let's learn from Ephron's foolish trade off and make wise choices and reach a good balance.

Let's try something this week:

1. Remember Ephron's trade-off. In return for the money that he made from Avraham he sacrificed a letter of his name in the holy Torah for all eternity. The money is now but a distant memory. With hindsight, do you think he is happy now with the outcome.
2. Try to do an honest calculation of how much time and effort you spend on acquiring material possessions. Ask yourself, what is it really costing you?

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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