

## 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 Toldot – Economics 101

In this week's Parsha of Toldot, we focus on the events of Yitzchak's life. When a famine strikes the land, Yitzchak is forced to move to the city of Gerar in the land of the Pelishtim. While in Gerar, Yitzchak has a number of disputes with the locals over water.

Water has always been a critical commodity. There was no plumbing and no desalination plants in those days. If one wanted a fresh supply of water, one needed to dig for it. And a fresh supply of water was necessary for bountiful crops, sustaining your flocks and economic success. Yitzchak attempted to dig a number of wells. But each time that he dug a well, the Pelishtim claimed that the water belonged to them. What was Yitzchak's response?

*And he moved away from there, and he dug another well. (Breishit 26:22)*

Instead of fighting for his rights and protecting his valuable resource, Yitzchak just moved on and tried to dig somewhere else. Eventually he found a supply of water and was left in peace.

*“For now Hashem has made room for us and we will be fruitful in the land”  
(Breishit 26:22)*

According to the laws of nature, someone who does not fight to defend their territory and to protect their economic rights will be less successful. Yet, that was not the case with Yitzchak:

*Yitzchak sowed in that land, and in that year he reaped **a hundred times** the expected yield. Thus had Hashem blessed him. And the man [Yitzchak] became great and he continued to become greater until he became extremely great. And he acquired flocks and herds and many enterprises. (Breishit 26:12-14)*

Since Hashem had decreed that Yitzchak would be successful, that is what happened. Though Yitzchak had to perform his hishtadlut, by digging and planting, he did not over-exert himself or fight to the death to protect his water supply. His crops were one hundred times more fruitful than his neighbours anyway, because that is what Hashem had decreed.

Let's contrast this with the work required for spiritual achievements. In the Parasha two weeks ago, we read about Akeidat Yitzchak. Avraham and Yitzchak invested a lot of effort into this nisayon. For three days they journeyed towards the site of the Akeidah, and the Satan tried the entire time to dissuade them from their task. It involved an enormous amount of emotional and spiritual work on their part. The result of this effort is the Akeidah which the Jewish people benefit from until today.

The Gemara teaches us that everything is in the hands of Heaven except for the fear of Heaven.<sup>1</sup> This essentially means that we can only control one area – our spiritual level. Our physical income is decreed every year at Rosh Hashanah time. Everyone receives from Hashem exactly

<sup>1</sup> Brachot 33b, based on Devarim 10:12, see Rashi to that verse. Note that Tosefot has a slightly different understanding of this concept.

what is allotted to them – not more and not less. And no one can touch what is not meant for them. But when it comes to spiritual accomplishments, Hashem leaves that up to us. Our achievements will be commensurate with the effort that we put in. With this in mind, let us ask the question - where does it make sense to devote most of our efforts?

Consider the following parable.

*The king was looking for a new worker to tend to his expansive gardens and orchards. The work was hard, but the pay was good. Shimon tried out for the job and he was chosen as the successful candidate. There were two tasks that had to be performed each day – watering and weeding. Watering was easy, Shimon just had to turn on the tap in the morning and turn it off half an hour later. That was it. He would receive 1 silver coin per day for this task. Weeding was a different story. Shimon would have to get down on his hands and knees in the hot sun and painstakingly pull out each weed by hand. This task was much harder, but the pay was more lucrative – 1 gold coin for every square metre that was de-weeded. Reuven very quickly realised that he preferred watering to weeding. Instead of just turning on the tap and relying on the sprinkler system to do its job he would carry buckets of water to lovingly water every corner of the expansive gardens by hand. The weather was hot, and he enjoyed spending time with the cool water. He could splash water on his face and sneak a drink every now and then. But when it came to weeding, he was much less enthusiastic. Towards the end of each day he would pull out a few token weeds. And then it was time for pay day. After all of that hard work he invested into watering the gardens he received... one silver coin per day.*

We all want to maximise our return on investment and increase our “earnings”. But no matter how much effort we invest into earning our physical income, the outcome is determined by Hashem. We just need to do our basic hishtadlut, personal effort.<sup>2</sup> But we can definitely make a huge difference to our “income” if we expend more effort in the spiritual realm. The more effort we put in, the greater our reward. And in this case, the reward that we earn is eternal. We have two sources of income – one which is fixed and one which is variable. It’s simple economics to invest our maximum efforts in the spiritual realm where our income is variable. This is the channel through which we truly can make a difference.

Let’s try something this week:

1. Think about how much effort you invest to increase your income. You do need to spend a reasonable amount of time doing your hishtadlut. But have you ever stopped to think about how much is reasonable?
2. Consider the fact that it is through your Torah and mitzvot that you can truly and permanently affect your life for all eternity.
3. Think about how much you invest into your spiritual income. Remember that it is only in this way that we can affect our lives. This “income” is variable – the reward really is commensurate with the effort.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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<sup>2</sup> The amount of effort that one is actually required to invest in each circumstance is a difficult question to answer. We need to think very carefully about this and ask for Rabbinic guidance.