

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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

Parashat Vayeshev – The need for suffering

This week's Parsha of Vayeshev begins as follows: “Vayeshev Yaakov (And Yaakov settled) in the land of his father's wandering, in the land of Canaan”. The word “Vayeshev” connotes settling down permanently. Rashi explains that Yaakov finally arrived back home in Eretz Canaan, and he was looking forward to settling down in tranquillity.

Yaakov had suffered. He had escaped from his brother who wanted to kill him, he was robbed of all his possessions by his nephew Eliphaz, he was tricked into marrying Leah, he had to work very hard for the duplicitous Lavan for 20 years, he was forced to flee from Haran with his whole family in the middle of the night, he had the frightening all-night battle with the angel, and then he suffered through the horrific incident of Dina's abduction by Shechem. Most people would agree that Yaakov was entitled to a bit of peace and quiet after having to overcome so much hardship. But it was not to be.

Rashi quotes the Midrash¹: “Hashem says: Are the righteous not satisfied with what is prepared for them in the World to Come? Do they also expect to live in tranquillity in this world?” As soon as Yaakov sought to dwell in tranquillity, he was faced with the tragedy of Yosef being kidnapped and sold to Mitzrayim. He had to wait another 22 years until he could finally experience a measure of emotional tranquillity!

Many of us can empathise with Yaakov's desire for tranquillity. We often put in an inordinate amount of effort into seeking a feeling of comfort and security. This reminds me of an old joke:

A successful businessman encountered a poor person relaxing on the beach.

Businessman: “Why are you wasting time lying on the beach? Why don't you get to work?”

Poor person: “But why?”

Businessman: “Because then you can start saving up some money.”

Poor person: “But why?”

Businessman: “Because you can then have a future that is financially secure.”

Poor person: “But why?”

Businessman: “Once you have a secure future you can take it easy and spend your time relaxing on the beach.”

Poor person: “But I'm doing that already!”

Ironically, we often work very hard to satisfy our body's desire for comfort, yet the process of working to achieve that comfort causes us greater discomfort!

As much as we all want to relax and take it easy², we all encounter suffering and hardship. Why?

The question of why bad things happen to good people has been troubling mankind for a long time and we certainly can't provide a complete explanation as to why suffering occurs. The complete

¹ Breishit Rabbah 84:6.

² Yaakov however was certainly not seeking physical comfort for his own benefit, but rather in order to be free to use the time of tranquility to learn Torah and work on himself.

answer to that question belongs to Hashem. However, there are some explanations that can go at least part of the way in explaining why suffering is necessary.

Rabbi Akiva Tatz provides us with an important insight based on the following Midrash which reveals one possible answer to this question:

“Rabbi Shimon says: ‘Every single blade of grass has a corresponding angel in the sky which hits it and tells it to grow’.”³

Rabbi Tatz points out the angel is **hitting** the grass and telling it to grow. Why the need to hit? Wouldn't it be nicer for the angel to speak gentle words of encouragement? “Remember to grow little one. There, there. What a clever and strong blade of grass you are”. Rabbi Tatz teaches that we can learn from this Midrash that growth is painful and difficult. Since growth is painful and we are creatures of comfort, then only if we experience a greater pain (i.e. being ‘hit’ by challenges) will we have the incentive to push past the pain and grow.

Economists have noticed that countries with colder climates tend to be more successful economically than countries with warmer climates⁴. The reason for this phenomenon has been hotly debated. One theory is that people living in warm climates are more comfortable physically and thus have less incentive to push past their natural limitations and risk discomfort in order to grow and develop.

Our bodies strive to obtain physical pleasure and minimise discomfort as much as possible. This reminds me of another joke.

Every morning there is a battle between my body and my neshama. My neshama wants me to jump out of bed and get to shul early for Shacharit. But my body wants to stay in bed for as long as possible where it is comfortable and warm. This morning I am proud to say that my neshama won. I was able to overcome my body! It took me an hour and a half, but I did it!

The Vilna Gaon states: “The main purpose of life is to improve our negative character traits. Otherwise what is life for?”⁵ We are put into this world to grow. Growth necessitates some measure of discomfort. Moving forward to the next level of personal growth is a huge achievement and it has to be earned. There is no such thing as a free lunch! As we learn in Pirkei Avot – “According to the effort is the reward”.⁶

Though we may not realise it at the time, discomfort is an act of kindness from Hashem because it pushes us to confront our negative middot and gives us the incentive to take risks, move out of our comfort zone and grow!

Let's try something this week:

1. Challenges and difficulties are necessary to push us to grow and improve. Keeping this in mind can help us to deal with those tough times.
2. Everyone faces challenges. Many people like to keep their challenges to themselves so we may not be aware of what they are going through. Understanding that others also experience painful growth can help us to cut other people some slack and be a bit more patient with them when they act inappropriately.

The next Darchai Noam will IY”H be for Parashat Vayechi. Visit www.darchai-noam.com for all back editions.

Shabbat Shalom and Chanukah Sameach, Rabbi Ledder

³ Midrash Rabba, Breishit 10:6.

⁴ See for example the difference between Northern Europe and Southern Europe. Of course, this is only a broad generalisation and there are exceptions. This theory is known as the “Climatic Theory of Economic Development”.

⁵ Even Shleimah.

⁶ Pirkei Avot 5:21.