

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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

Parashat Vayetze – I have a dream!

In this week's Parasha of Vayezte, we read about Yaakov's journey to his uncle Lavan and the time he spends there building up his family. The Parasha ends with Yaakov on his way back to the house of his father Yitzchak in the Land of Canaan.

Interestingly, the entire Parasha of Vayetze does not have any paragraph breaks. The Midrash¹ explains that the paragraph breaks in the Torah represent pauses in Hashem's prophecy to Moshe, giving Moshe time for reflection. (The Midrash adds - If Moshe, who heard the Torah directly from Hashem and spoke with the holy spirit, had to pause and reflect between parshah and parshah, and verse and verse, how much more so, do we need to!) However the entire Parashat Vayetze consists of one exceptionally long paragraph. Perhaps this is related to the subject matter of the Parasha. Yaakov has left his father's house in the Holy Land, and he is in exile in the home of his wicked uncle in Charan. It is almost as if we are holding our breath, not daring to pause, until Yaakov can finally return to Eretz Yisrael.

Yaakov's exile in the house of Lavan is book-ended by two dreams.

Dream 1: A ladder reaching up to Heaven

Our Parasha begins with Yaakov fleeing from Eisav and to the wicked Lavan. On the way, Yaakov stops for the night and experiences his famous dream of a ladder reaching up to Heaven.² This is the dream of someone who is interested in self-development. Someone who understands that the journey to Heaven (i.e. spiritual growth) requires continuous effort, step-by-step as you climb the ladder. Someone who is interested and involved in spiritual improvement.

Dream 2: Flocks of sheep

After spending fourteen years working as a shepherd for Lavan, Yaakov spends an additional six years building up his own wealth.³ He is now working to increase the size of his own flocks. At the end of the six years, Yaakov has another dream.⁴ An angel of Hashem appears to Yaakov in the dream and informs him that Hashem is aware that Lavan was trying to deceive Yaakov and withhold his pay. Therefore, the flocks of sheep under Yaakov's care were reproducing in a way that would maximise Yaakov's wealth.

Let's compare the subject matter of the two dreams. In the first, Yaakov dreams about spiritual ascension. In the second he dreams about flocks of sheep! Perhaps it is no coincidence that this is the point at which the angel instructs Yaakov to leave Lavan and return to his father's house. Yaakov has spent too long immersed in the world of business, to the extent that he has started to dream about it!

¹ Torat Kohanim 1:9.

² Breishit 28:11-12.

³ Breishit 31:41.

⁴ Breishit 31:10-13.

The Gemara⁵ teaches that although many of our dreams are just nonsense, some of our dreams can be significant, and they may contain an element of prophesy. Many examples are given of dreams and how they can be interpreted. However, the Gemara notes that there are also dreams which are not prophetic because the dreamer is just seeing a vision that is connected to what they were thinking about during the day. The subject matter of our dreams is often influenced by the things that we experienced, or which occupied our thoughts during the day. The Gemara⁶ brings the following incident:

The Roman emperor said to Rabbi Yehoshua, son of Rabbi Chananya: "You Jews say that you are extremely wise. If that is so, tell me what I will dream about tonight". Rabbi Yehoshua said to him: "You will see the Persians capture you, and enslave you, and force you to herd unclean animals with a golden staff". The Roman emperor thought the entire day about the images described to him by Rabbi Yehoshua and that night he saw it in his dream.

Rabbi Yehoshua was not a prophet. So how did he know what the emperor would dream about? He was very clever. At that point in history the Persians were the biggest rivals to the Roman Empire. Rabbi Yehoshua presumed that the emperor spent much of his time worrying about the Persians. By describing a vivid image of the emperor being captured by his greatest enemy, Rabbi Yehoshua could almost guarantee that the emperor would spend the day obsessing about this and it would therefore permeate into his dreams at night.

There are practical and Torah principles related to dreams. If one has a bad dream and is concerned that it might be prophetic, various recommendations are provided – fasting,⁷ reciting a particular prayer during Birkat Kohanim⁸ and reciting the amelioration of dreams in front of 3 friends⁹. However, if one saw something distressing during the day that caused them to have a bad dream, such a dream is not prophetic and is of no concern.¹⁰

The dreams that we have at night are subconscious and we can't seem to control them. They can provide us with a good indication of where we are holding and what is occupying our thoughts during the day. (Or what is going on in our subconscious and issues that we need to deal with.) If we want to try to influence our dreams, we can try to fall asleep with positive thoughts or Torah thoughts. Many Torah scholars try to fall asleep at night with thoughts of Torah on their mind, revising what they have learnt. What a beautiful way to fall asleep and to guarantee pleasant dreams!

In addition to our night-time dreams, our daydreams are also important indicators of where we are holding. When our mind wanders, where does it go? What do we think about? Are we thinking about our business? Our errands? Our lunch? Being aware of what draws our attention may provide us with insight into what is important to us.

Let's try something this week:

1. Be aware of where your mind wanders when you let it. What occupies your thoughts during the day? Remember – your mind is expensive real estate – don't give up your mental space cheaply.
2. Try to think of Torah thoughts or spiritual matters before falling asleep at night.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁵ Brachot 55a-56b.

⁶ Brachot 56a. The translation that appears here includes the explanations of Rashi.

⁷ Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 220:2. The Mishnah Berurah (seif katan 6) adds that fasting on its own is not sufficient, one also needs to do teshuva.

⁸ Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 130 and from page 696 of the standard Ashkenazi Artscroll siddur.

⁹ Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 202:2 and page 922 of the standard Ashkenazi Artscroll siddur.

¹⁰ Sha'ar HaTzion siman 220 seif katan 1.