

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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

Parashat Vayechi – Yaakov’s military tactics

In this week’s Parasha of Vayechi, at the end of Sefer Breishit, we read about Yaakov blessing his children and putting his affairs in order before his death. Yaakov provides a special bracha to Yosef’s sons, Ephraim and Menashe, elevating them to the status of Yaakov’s other sons. Yaakov then grants Yosef an extra portion in the land of Israel.

And I have given you Shechem, one portion over your brothers, which I took from the hand of the Amorite with my sword and with my bow. (Breishit 48:22)¹

Rashi explains that Yaakov granted Yosef this extra portion in return for Yosef ensuring that Yaakov would be buried properly in Chevron. Rashi also explains that this portion, the city of Shechem, will eventually be Yosef’s burial site. But why does Yaakov emphasise that he captured Shechem with his sword and his bow? What does this information add? Does Yosef really need a lesson in military tactics?

In his translation of this pasuk, Onkelos explains that Yaakov was referring to his prayers and requests². It is true that we need hishtadlut, we need to make a reasonable effort with the physical means that we have at our disposal. However, it is our tefillot that support and effectuate that effort. If Hashem does not help us in our endeavours, then they will all be for nought. As David states in Tehillim:

If Hashem will not build a house, its builders have toiled at it in vain; if Hashem will not guard a city, its watcher guards it in vain. (Tehillim 127:1)

Onkelos’ interpretation reminds us that our tefillot are a most important aspect of our achievement and success. But a question remains. Why did Yaakov specifically choose to mention his sword and bow? Is there a deeper message hidden in these words?

The Meshech Chochmah³ provides us with a fascinating insight. He explains that there are two types of tefillot. There are the standard prayers that appear in the siddur, which were authored by the Men of the Great Assembly (and other great people). And there are the non-standard prayers, those prayers that we formulate by ourselves in a time of need, when we call out to Hashem in our own words.

The first type of prayer can be compared to a sword. A well trained swordsman can use a sword to great effect. But anyone can pick up a sharp sword, slash it around and cause a decent amount of damage without much effort. Similarly, the words of the tefillot that were written for us contain enormous power. The more effort that we put into those words, understanding them and thinking about their meaning, the more potent they can be. However, even merely reading the words without much focus can have a powerful spiritual effect.

On the other hand, a bow (and arrow) is very different. If one just picks up a bow and arrow and aimlessly shoots into the air, there will most likely be no benefit whatsoever. But if used properly, a bow and arrow has a very important advantage over a sword. One can attack the enemy effectively at a much greater distance than with a sword. But one needs to pay attention and aim carefully, otherwise the arrow will not

¹ The word “Shechem” means portion. Rashi explains that it also refers to the city of Shechem, the place where Yosef is buried.

² Rashi provides a slightly different explanation – he explains the terms as relating to wisdom and prayer.

³ By Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk (1843–1926). This insight appears in his commentary to Parashat Vayishlach. I heard this idea from Rabbi Shalom Rosner.

hit its target. Similarly, when we call out to Hashem in our own words, we cannot rely on the power and holiness of the beautiful words that were written for us. We can't just mumble some words and expect them to be potent. But if we put real kavana into those words, we can achieve even more than we can achieve with our fixed tefillot.⁴

Yosef was known as someone who constantly prayed to Hashem in his own words. Before and after every interaction he would turn to Hashem. Potiphar thought that he was muttering incantations, but he was really asking Hashem for success and thanking Him. The commentators explain that this contributed greatly to his success.⁵

This link between military activity and prayers is highlighted by a fascinating observation on the Torah's linguistic style.⁶ The Nefesh HaGer⁷ points out that whenever a foreign nation fights another nation, the expression used throughout the Torah and the Tanach is "בחרב" (becharev) i.e. with the sword. However, whenever the Jewish people kills by the sword the expression is always "לפי חרב" (lephi charev).⁸ Rabbi Avigdor Bonchek explains that "lephi charev" means "by the blade of the sword" but it literally translates as "by the mouth of the sword". He suggests that this is appropriate because one cuts meat with their mouth while eating and similarly a sword cuts human meat in battle.

But there is a deeper meaning to this expression. Rabbi Bonchek takes us back to Yaakov's preparations for battle with his brother Eisav⁹. Yaakov prepared himself with gifts, prayer and battle. Before preparing for battle comes prayer, begging Hashem for assistance. Perhaps this is why the phrase "by the mouth of the sword" is only used when Jewish people go out to battle. We always put prayer before battle. First, we use our mouths to ask Hashem for help and then we go out to battle against our enemies.

We all "go out to battle" every day. Sometimes we battle against external enemies. But every day we go to battle against our own yetzer hara. We have two very potent weapons at our disposal. Our "sword" and our "bow". Our fixed tefillot and our heartfelt personal supplications. Let's use both of those tools to maximum effect before we step out into the battlefield.

Let's try something this week:

1. How well do we use the tefillot that appear in the siddur? Do we focus on the words? Do we understand the meaning of the prayers? Rav Shimshon David Pincus writes that the time to learn the meaning of the words in our prayers is not while we are praying! We have to put in the effort beforehand.
2. Do we use the second method of prayer regularly? Do we call out to Hashem outside of our regular prayers? Try offering a short prayer to Hashem in your own words, asking for success, before beginning a challenging task.

Chazak, chazak venitchazek!

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁴ We can add that this second type of prayer includes two components. Firstly, the prayers that we offer to Hashem outside of the formal tefillot. Second, the personal additions that we make to our fixed tefillot at the appropriate places during our fixed tefillot, such as when we add personal requests during the bracha of שומע תפילה, the 16th bracha of the Amidah. (The appropriate place to insert personal requests is towards the end of this bracha, before the words שומע אתה כי).

⁵ See for example Rashi and the Midrash Tanchuma on Breishit 39:3.

⁶ See "What is Bothering Rashi" for Parashat Matot, by Rabbi Avigdor Bonchek (<https://www.aish.com/tp/i/wbr/48918037.html>)

⁷ A commentary on Targum Onkelos.

⁸ See for example, Bamidbar 20:18 and Shmot 17:13. The single exception throughout all of Tanach is in Bamidbar 31:8 and this prompts Rashi to comment that the Jewish people in that case had exchanged their craft of prayer and supplication for the craft of the nations. See Rashi there for more on this point.

⁹ Breishit 32:10.