

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נעם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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

Parashat Vayera – The Give and Take

In this week's Parasha of Vayera, we read about Avraham's meeting with the three angels. Avraham was recovering from his brit milah and Hashem deliberately made the day extremely hot so there would be no travellers and he would not be troubled with visitors. But when Hashem saw Avraham's distress that no visitors were coming, he sent him three angels in the guise of men.¹ Avraham, thinking that the angels were human travellers, interrupted his meeting with Hashem to show hospitality for the visitors. Avraham and Sarah prepared a gourmet banquet and Avraham even slaughtered three calves in order to feed each of them the delicacy of a tongue with mustard².

The pasuk³ tells us that the angels ate the food that was presented to them. Rashi, quoting the Gemara,⁴ explains that the angels didn't really eat, because angels don't eat physical food. Rather, they just appeared to be eating.

The Gemara states:

Rebbi Tanchum bar Chanilai says, "A person should never deviate from the local custom, as Moshe ascended to Heaven and did not eat bread while he was there, whereas the ministering angels descended to this world and they ate bread. Did they actually eat bread? Can it enter your mind that they actually ate food? Rather, we must say that they merely appeared as though they ate and drank".

Why did the angels have to pretend to eat? They could have easily said that they were not hungry. They could have claimed that they had enough food of their own and had just eaten. However, we saw above that Hashem sent the angels as an act of kindness to Avraham. Avraham was pained when he did not have opportunity to perform kindness. Even more than he was pained by his recent operation! If the angels had turned up to Avraham's tent and not partaken of his food, how would Avraham had felt? We can suggest that the angels pretending to eat was in order for Avraham to fulfil his desire to perform chesed.

A question arises about the angel's behaviour – when they took the food, was this an act of *taking* from Avraham? Or an act of *giving* to Avraham?

Rav Dessler⁵ writes that human behaviour can be divided into two categories – taking or giving. Every time we perform an activity or interact with another, we are either taking or giving. Giving is a sublime power, it is one of the attributes of Hashem. The faculty of taking, on the other hand, is when a person tries to draw to himself whatever comes within his reach. People refer to this trait as 'selfishness'. Rav Dessler writes that this trait is the root of all evil in the world. He adds that these two powers – of giving and taking – form the roots of all character traits and of all actions. Even though the motivations of people appear to be grey, rather than black and white, Rav Dessler argues that every person is devoted, at the deepest level of his personality, to one or the other of the two sides. In every act, thought and word – one is always devoted either to lovingkindness and giving, or to grasping and taking. Rav Dessler writes that most people generally are born with a drive towards taking, and when they give it is often with the underlying intention of

¹ Rashi to Breishit 18:1.

² Rashi to Breishit 18:7.

³ Breishit 18:8.

⁴ Baba Metzia 86b.

⁵ "The discourse on lovingkindness", Carmell, A., Strive for Truth (English translation of Rav Dessler's Michtav Me'Eliyahu), Feldheim 1988, p118

taking something in return. Tzaddikim, however, are very different. They maximise their giving and have pure motivation. The little that they do 'take' is essential for them, since it enables them to maintain their acts of giving.

In reality, giving and taking are often not so clear cut. Sometimes, what looks like an act of taking is really an act of giving. When a young child comes home from kindergarten with a piece of artwork for Ima, the Ima accepts it with effusive praise and sticks it up proudly on the fridge. The mother really doesn't need a dirty and squashed piece of paper with a faint squiggle displayed on her fridge. But the child feels amazing to see his masterpiece on display. It's true that the mother does feel some pleasure and nachos when her child hands over the artwork, but in essence the mother is really *giving* to the child when she performs that act of *taking* the artwork.

And vice versa. When there is a great Rav or prestigious person visiting town, it is a great privilege to host them. However, the act of hosting might essentially be used as an opportunity to improve one's reputation! Thus, the act of hosting, which appears to be an act of giving, might in essence be an act of taking.

This interaction of taking and giving can actually have a fascinating halachic implication. For kiddushin (betrothal) to be halachically valid, the groom must hand to the bride an amount of money, or an item that has a certain monetary value⁶. If the bride gives the money or the item to the groom, then the kiddushin is not valid. However, the Gemara⁷ discusses a case of betrothal where a woman gave a gift to an important man. In that case, the fact that he agreed to accept the gift gives her benefit and that receipt of benefit can be valid for the purposes of kiddushin. In this case, the act of giving by the woman was deemed in reality to be an act of taking.

Our aim is to emulate Hashem. As it says in the Gemara, when explaining the difficult word וְאֵנִי which appears in the Song of the Sea:⁸

Abba Shaul says: "Ve'anveihu should be interpreted as if it were written in two words: Ani vaHu [literally, "Me and Him"]. We should try to be similar to Him. Just as He is compassionate and merciful, so too we should be compassionate and merciful."

Why do we want to emulate Hashem?⁹ Our aim is to be as close as possible to Hashem in the World to Come. But what does the word 'close' mean in a spiritual sense? In Olam Hazeh, which is physical, 'close' can be understood geographically or chronologically. I can be close to you because I am standing next to you. And Tuesday is closer to Wednesday than it is to Thursday. But in the spiritual World to Come, there is no concept of space or time.¹⁰ So how can we be 'close' to Hashem in the World to Come? The answer is that closeness in the spiritual sense means *similarity*. The more similar that I am to something, the closer I am to it in a spiritual sense. Thus, the key to getting close to Hashem is being similar to Him.

Hashem is the ultimate Giver. Creating the universe was, and is, a pure act of giving. As a Perfect being He does not need anything, so when He gives, He takes nothing in return. So it follows, that whenever we focus on giving, we are emulating Hashem and setting ourselves up to be closer to Hashem in the World to Come. And the purer that our 'giving' can be, i.e. the less it is tainted with 'taking', the closer that we come to emulating Hashem, in His purest form of giving.

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to be conscious of our acts, words and thoughts – are they on the side of giving or on the side of taking?
2. When we do perform acts of giving, try to recognise whether the act of giving is tainted with an underlying aspect of taking. And then try to choose more selfless acts of giving going forward.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁶ There are other ways to perform kiddushin, but the general custom these days is to use this method.

⁷ Kiddushin 7a and Shulchan Aruch Even HaEzer siman 27 seif 9.

⁸ Shabbat 133b, the word appears in Shmot 15:2.

⁹ I heard the following explanation from R' Dovid Tsap, based on mystical sources.

¹⁰ The kabbalists teach that there actually is some concept of time in the World to Come but it is 'weaker' than the concept of time that we have in this world. I have no idea what that means.