

## DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

### “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Vayetze  
December 2022 / Kislev 5783

[darchai.noam@gmail.com](mailto:darchai.noam@gmail.com)  
[www.darchai-noam.com](http://www.darchai-noam.com)

How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

### Parashat Vayetze – All we need is a miracle

In this week's Parasha of Vayetze, we read about Yaakov's time in Lavan's house as he builds up his family. He has seven children from his wife Leah, one son from his wife Rachel and two sons from each of the maidservants. (Rachel would give birth to one more son after the family returns to Eretz Canaan.)

In this Parasha, the Torah records the birth of Leah's daughter Dinah.<sup>1</sup> The Gemara<sup>2</sup> brings an interesting story behind the birth of Dinah. Leah knew through Divine inspiration that twelve tribes were destined to emerge from Yaakov.<sup>3</sup> She had already given birth to six sons and the maidservants had given birth to two sons each. Rachel only had one son at that stage for a total of eleven sons. Leah knew that if she gave birth to another son, her sister Rachel would only contribute one son, which would be less than the maidservants. Therefore, Leah prayed to Hashem that her child be female. The foetus was originally male. But, the Gemara tells us, as a result of that prayer, the foetus was transformed into a female.

Though Leah's prayer demonstrates compassion and sisterly love, it goes against a clear Mishnah. The Mishnah<sup>4</sup> states that we are not permitted to pray for that which is already past. The Mishnah gives the example of a man who prays that his wife gives birth to a male. Such a prayer is in vain because the gender of the foetus has already been determined and cannot be changed by natural means. In other words, it is not permitted to pray for a miracle. Rashi<sup>5</sup> explains that, even though Hashem can change the laws of nature at will, it is not appropriate for us to ask Him to do so. So how could Leah pray for this<sup>6</sup>?

The Gemara provides two possible answers.

**Answer 1:** Leah was an exception. As a perfectly righteous individual she was allowed to pray for miracles and her prayers were in fact answered. However, ordinary people, who are not on such an exalted level, should not ask Hashem for a miracle.

**Answer 2:** The Gemara then suggests that Leah's prayer took place during the first 40 days of the pregnancy. During this time, the gender of the embryo is not yet determined, and therefore it is permitted to daven for a particular gender.

The prohibition against davening about something that has already been determined is codified in the Shulchan Aruch.<sup>7</sup> The Shulchan Aruch states as follows: "One who davens about something in the past... has prayed in vain. Rather, one should pray about future matters and gives thanks regarding the past." The Shulchan Aruch gives an example of a prayer in vain – praying for one's pregnant wife to give birth to a son. (The Mishnah Berurah<sup>8</sup> adds that the prohibition only applies after 40 days of the pregnancy.) To pray that Hashem changes something that already happened is essentially asking for a miracle, which is not appropriate.

<sup>1</sup> There is an opinion that each of Yaakov's sons also had a twin sister (see Rashi to Breishit 37:35).

<sup>2</sup> Brachot 60a.

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Yaakov had 12 sons, however one of those sons, Yosef, split into two separate tribes – Ephraim and Menashe. However, we always count twelve tribes, not thirteen. Depending on the circumstances we will count Yosef as one tribe or we will not count one of the other tribes (Shimon or Levi). In a mystical sense, the 12 tribes represent the 12 months of the year. Interestingly, in a leap year, we have 13 months in the year, representing the 'full count' of 13 tribes.

<sup>4</sup> Masechet Brachot, Chapter 9, Mishnah 3.

<sup>5</sup> Chullin 43a.

<sup>6</sup> Of course, Leah lived before the times of the Mishnah, and she was not necessarily bound by the Torah. However, we are arguing here that the Mishnah is quoting a general principle that Leah should have been aware of. This is actually a much broader topic and there is no space to delve into it here.

<sup>7</sup> Orach Chaim, siman 230, seif 1.

<sup>8</sup> Seif katan 1.

However, the very next halacha that the Shulchan Aruch brings seems difficult to reconcile with this halacha about praying for things in the past. This halacha states as follows:<sup>9</sup>

*One who is about to measure his grain should pray: "May it be Hashem's will that bracha is sent to this pile [of grain]" ... If he measured and then prayed, it is a prayer in vain since blessing is only found on those items that are hidden from view.*

In other words, Hashem prefers to respond to prayers concerning matters that have not yet been overtly determined. Therefore, one should only daven for Hashem to increase his grain (or stock, or money) before he has counted it. Before counting, any blessing will not be noticeable and therefore it is permitted to daven for it to increase.<sup>10</sup> (It follows that one should avoid using an accountant that is too efficient!)

This raises a question - why is it permissible to daven for more grain before counting it, but forbidden to daven for a male after 40 days' gestation? Isn't the baby's gender also 'hidden from the eye'?

Here are some possible answers to this tricky question:

- The gender of a baby after 40 days' gestation is not necessarily 'hidden from the eye'. It is possible to do a medical test such as an ultrasound to find out the gender. In addition, there are those who claim that the gender of the baby can be determined through various 'clues' such as the way that a woman carries the baby. Some of these 'clues' might actually be accurate.
- Increasing grain is 'ש' מ'ש' (adding to something that already exists) whereas changing the gender of a baby is 'ש' מ'אין' (creating something out of nothing). We can suggest that Hashem is generally more willing to do the former than the latter because the latter is a more obvious open miracle.<sup>11</sup> That is why it is only permitted to daven within 40 days, because the gender of the foetus has not yet been determined.
- Rav Yitzchok Zilberstein suggests that grain can swell naturally from moisture. The weight will increase but the actual number of individual grains stays the same. Thus, any change to the weight is within nature.
- Rav Chaim Kanievsky explains that changing a gender is a miracle that is against the laws of nature, but increasing grain is not such a miracle because Hashem created grain with a nature to increase.<sup>12</sup>

In reality, everything is being constantly created 'ש' מ'אין' by Hashem! But since we are used to it, it appears "natural" to us. The Ramban explains<sup>13</sup> that Hashem performed some revealed miracles historically in order to remind us that everything is miraculous! Hashem 'prefers' to stay within nature as much as possible. Increasing something that already exists is less of an open miracle because people may just assume they calculated wrongly. "I thought there was only 200mL of oil, now I see that there is more, I must have been wrong." But to create something totally new is a much more obvious miracle. Hashem generally prefers not to perform obvious miracles because that could impact our free will.

But another question arises. During Chanukah (which is not too far away!) we add Al Hanisim to our Birkat Hamazon where we thank Hashem for the miracles that He performed for us in the times of Maccabees. If one forgot to say Al Hanisim, they can make it up by adding a special 'Harachaman' – a passage that appears towards the end of Birkat Hamazon. The wording of that addition is as follows: "May the Compassionate One perform miracles and wonders for us, as He performed for our forefathers in those days, at this time." Isn't that explicitly asking Hashem for miracles? Isn't that against the halacha we quoted above that one is forbidden to ask for miracles? The commentators suggest a few possibilities, e.g., perhaps Chanukah is different because that is a time of miracles. Or perhaps it is only forbidden to ask for 'private' miracles, but to ask for miracles on behalf of all of Am Yisrael would be permitted.

Let's try something this week:

1. Even though we shouldn't daven for explicit miracles, we can always daven for 'hidden' miracles. Hashem has infinite ways to give us what we need. Don't hold back from asking Hashem for your needs, whatever they may be.
2. Remember the Ramban's teaching – everything Hashem does and gives us truly is miraculous. This is a beautiful way to view the world.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

\* To subscribe please email [darchai.noam@gmail.com](mailto:darchai.noam@gmail.com)

<sup>9</sup> Orach Chaim, siman 230, seif 2. The source of this halacha is the Gemara Taanit 8b.

<sup>10</sup> For the physicists – this sounds eerily like quantum physics, i.e., the act of measurement has an effect on the system.

<sup>11</sup> That is why the prophet Elisha told the poor woman to start using her existing oil when he miraculously provided her with plenty of oil that she could sell to pay off her debts. Hashem generally 'prefers' to increase what already exists rather than perform open miracles and create something from nothing. See the full story in Melachim II, 4:1-7.

<sup>12</sup> I understand this to mean that when we plant grain it naturally multiplies.

<sup>13</sup> In his commentary to the Torah at the end of Parashat Bo.