

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם**Its ways are ways of pleasantness**

(Mishlei 3:17)

Vayigash, December 2015 (Resent in 5783)

darchai.noam@gmail.com

How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Vayigash – Providing comfort

In this week's Parsha of Vayigash, the tension is building up to a dramatic climax. The brothers have been sent from pillar to post by this crazy Egyptian ruler. He has accused them of being spies, he imprisoned Shimon, he refused to see them if they didn't bring Binyamin with them, he entertained them with a feast and wine and then he threatened to keep Binyamin as a slave. There is no apparent logic to this behaviour and the brothers have no idea what is going on, other than a thought that they are somehow being punished for their treatment of Yosef many years ago. All the brothers know for sure is that if they go back to their father Yaakov without Binyamin it would be devastating. Yehuda valiantly defends Binyamin with an impassioned plea and an offer to take his place in slavery.

And then, finally, the Egyptian ruler says two words that explain everything:

“אני יוסף – I am Yosef” (Breishit 45:3)

In an instant, everything made sense. The brothers could not respond because of the shock and the shame.

The Chofetz Chaim compares Yosef revealing himself to the brothers to Hashem revealing himself at the End of Days¹. Just like the brothers, we can't understand why there is so much suffering in the world. Why do the wicked prosper? Why do the righteous suffer? At the End of Days Hashem will reveal Himself to the world with two words: “Ani Hashem” and then everything will make sense.

There are no questions in the World to Come. It is only from our limited perspective in this world that things don't make sense. Our view from this world has been described as looking at the back a tapestry – it looks like a jumble of knotted string with no apparent logic. When we view the tapestry from the correct side everything makes sense.

The story is told about one of the Ramban's students who was on his death bed. The Ramban visited his student and presented him with a number of serious questions about the affairs of the Jewish nation. His student was about to enter the world of truth where everything would be revealed. He asked his student to come back to him in a dream with the answers to his questions. The student did come back in a dream, but the Ramban was disappointed. There were no answers. The student explained that when he arrived in the World to Come and wanted to present the questions, there were simply no questions to ask. In the world of truth everything is just and righteous.²

We all have some pretty big questions that we have no way of understanding. Personal suffering. The holocaust. The suffering of children. No more examples are needed. There are many events

¹ This idea is brought by many commentators and it seems to be based on the Midrash. Interestingly, The Avnei Shoham points out that the phrase “Ani Hashem” appears in the haftarah for this week's Parsha (Yechezkel 37:28).

² Brought in Yalkut Me'am Lo'ez (Parshat Shoftim)

that just can't be explained. But we can achieve some level of comfort by realising that answers do exist, we just don't understand them at the moment.

"For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways," says the Hashem." (Yeshayahu 55:8)

We can use this approach to achieve comfort for ourselves. But what about comforting others? If someone is suffering, is it appropriate to talk to them about philosophy and to try to justify their pain?

The book of Iyov (Job) tackles the difficult question of how to respond to suffering. Iyov was righteous and tremendously successful, but it all came crashing down. He suffered indescribable torment and he lost almost everything that he had. Three good friends came to visit him and tried to comfort him. The friends try their best to come up with the right words, but they fail dismally. "It's all for the best", "you need to examine your behaviour", "you must have done something to deserve this suffering". Even if their message is right, their timing is wrong. A time of suffering is not an appropriate time to educate. Afterwards, when the suffering has passed, and if the person is ready, we can talk about philosophy. That is why when we visit a house of mourning we should not initiate a discussion. We should wait for the mourner to speak, if and when they are ready.

Once Rav Moshe Feinstein went on long drive to visit a house of mourning. He arrived and sat silently in the room of the person sitting shiva. The mourner did not say a word and neither did the Rav. After sitting in silence for quite some time Rav Moshe got up and recited the traditional phrase of comfort and left. On the way back his driver commented that after such a long drive the visit seems to have been a waste of time. Rav Moshe responded: "On the contrary, we have no idea how much comfort the mourner received just by sitting with him there in the room".

When someone is in the midst of suffering, the best approach can often be to just be there with them and share in their pain. Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis tells the following story about her late husband, Rabbi Theodore Jungreis. Rebbetzin Jungreis met a person who had recently finished sitting shiva. The person could not stop raving about how much comfort he had received from Rabbi Jungreis. Out of all of the visitors that came to the house of mourning Rabbi Jungreis was able to help him out of his sorrow and to come to terms with his loss. Rebbetzin Jungreis was intrigued. Comforting a mourner is always challenging. She wanted to know her husband's secret. What did he say that had such a profound effect? She asked her husband to reveal what had happened at the house of mourning. Rabbi Jungreis didn't think that he did anything special. He told his wife that he had just felt the suffering of the other person so strongly that all he could do was hug him and cry.

Let's try something this week:

1. When we suffer or face hardships, try to remember that there is a reason. Hashem is perfectly fair and just. We should use the suffering as an impetus to examine our deeds and see where we can improve.
2. When those around us are suffering, our approach needs to be the exact opposite. We should not philosophise or rebuke. The best approach is often to just be there and share in their pain.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Ledder