

# DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

## “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Vayishlach  
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 Vayishlach – The kiss of death

In this week's Parasha of Vayishlach we read about the dramatic encounter between Yaakov and Eisav. After, being apart for more than 30 years, Yaakov is finally returning home, but first he must confront Eisav. The last time the brothers had seen each other was when Eisav had sworn to kill Yaakov for stealing the brachot from Yitzchak. Given the history of their relationship, Yaakov adopted a number of strategies to prepare for this upcoming meeting – he prepared his camp for war, he sent a generous gift to Eisav and he prayed to Hashem for help.

Let's look at part of Yaakov's prayer to Hashem:

*"Now save me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Eisav, for I am afraid of him"* (Breishit 32:12)

An obvious question arises. Why did Yaakov ask Hashem to save him from the hand of his brother and also ask Him to save him from the hand of Eisav? Yaakov only had one brother and there was only one Eisav. Even if there was another person called Eisav, it was pretty clear who Yaakov was worried about – Hashem didn't need Yaakov to clarify it. So why did he mention both?

Rashi explains that Yaakov was referring to the fact that Eisav was not acting like a brother, but rather he was acting like the wicked Eisav, and that is why Yaakov needed to be saved.

Other commentators<sup>1</sup> explain that Yaakov was actually afraid of two separate threats:

**Threat 1:** The wicked Eisav – who wanted to kill him and probably his family too.

**Threat 2:** Eisav in his capacity as his brother - who perhaps, after so many years, had forgiven Yaakov and now wanted to live together in brotherly love.

We can well understand the first threat. But why would Yaakov be afraid of a friendly Eisav who bore him no ill will?

And if we take a closer look at Yaakov's prayer, the question becomes even stronger. We see that Yaakov mentioned 'my brother' before he mentioned 'Eisav'. This suggests that he was even more concerned about the threat posed by a 'friendly' Eisav.

Interestingly, Yaakov's concern had a very real basis. When Yaakov finally met Eisav, Eisav ran toward him and embraced him, fell on his neck and kissed him.<sup>2</sup> The Midrash<sup>3</sup> explains that Eisav originally planned to bite Yaakov's neck and kill him. However, Yaakov's neck miraculously turned to marble, so Eisav changed tactics and started kissing Yaakov instead. So we see that Yaakov was right to be concerned about both threats – the blood-thirsty Eisav and the loving brother. But we still don't understand why Yaakov is so concerned about the second threat.

We can explain as follows.<sup>4</sup> Yaakov was concerned that the loving brother Eisav will want to live in peace and brotherhood with Yaakov. He will want to invite Yaakov to his house, socialise with him, and share common interests. Eventually the families may come to intermarry. The mission of Yaakov's family was to be Hashem's chosen people and bring ethical monotheism to the world. Yaakov could not afford for his

<sup>1</sup> Pardes Yosef, quoting the Yalkut Shimoni.

<sup>2</sup> Breishit 33:4.

<sup>3</sup> Yalkut Shimoni 133.

<sup>4</sup> Based on a number of commentators, such as the Beis HaLevi and Rav Shlomo Breur, the son-in-law of Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch.

family to be subject to the influences of Eisav and his family. Even if Eisav had good intentions, his worldview was not consistent with Yaakov and his influence would water down the Jewish people. Eisav's kiss would be a kiss of death. Spiritual death. Yaakov understood that this was an even greater risk than physical death.

This is a very practical issue for us today. To what extent should we mix with the people around us? On the one hand, we have a very important mission in the world and a very powerful message that we need to share. We can't afford to be distracted and influenced by any negative culture. On the other hand, some may argue that if we stay totally separate from the world around us, we will not be able to influence and teach others. Some choose to live in a way that minimises exposure to outside culture as much as possible. But for many of us, the practical reality is that we don't have much of a choice. We need to live in society, earn a living and interact with those around us. To what extent do we have to be alive to this issue of Eisav's kiss of death?

In the early 1800s in Eastern Europe, the Jewish community in Russia was suffering persecution under the Romanov dynasty. At the same time, Napoleon was busy conquering swathes of Europe and granting liberal reforms. This liberalisation under Napoleon could bring a life of greater comfort and ease to the long-suffering Jewish community of Russia and Eastern Europe. When Napoleon turned his attention to Russia in 1807, the leaders of the Jewish community had to decide whether to support him or the existing Russian empire. As well as providing political and logistical support, when the Jews would turn to Hashem in prayer, the question was which army should they pray for? Remarkably, the Rabbis chose to support Russia. The Rabbis had a deep understanding of human nature and the risks of freedom and assimilation.

The laws of kashrut are a natural barrier to intermingling. People often connect through food. If we are restricted from eating together, we are less likely to mingle socially and form connections.<sup>5</sup> In fact, our Sages were well aware of this, and they instituted extra stringencies such as bishul akum<sup>6</sup> specifically to minimise social interactions between Jews and non-Jews.

Over the course of our long Jewish history, we have suffered under the oppression of the 'wicked Eisav'. The numbers speak for themselves. But we have also suffered from 'our brother'. The rate of assimilation and intermarriage also speaks for itself.

We should remember that we are in the same position as Yaakov was in this Parasha. Just like Yaakov's children, our children are also the future of the Jewish people. We still have the same important mission that Yaakov had. We at least need to be conscious of the issue and try to take the appropriate steps to minimise our exposure to negative influences.

We are lucky to be living in a relatively comfortable galut. Though the wicked Eisav has certainly not gone away, for most of the Jewish communities in the world, he is much less of a threat than he used to be. But the threat of 'our brother' is ever-present and stronger than ever. Unlike the threat of the 'wicked Eisav', we need to be aware and vigilant in order to avoid succumbing. We need to be conscious of this threat.

Let's try something this week:

1. Remember that just like Yaakov, we have an important mission – to bring Hashem to the world. Just like Yaakov, we should remember that one of the threats to this mission being accomplished is if we allow ourselves to be embraced by the negative aspects of secular culture.
2. Try to be aware of what influences we and our children are exposed to and what we let into our house.
3. Ask ourselves honestly whether these influences are appropriate or not and whether they should be restricted.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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

---

<sup>5</sup> There is a fascinating kabbalistic explanation for this phenomenon. The mouth is the organ of 'connection'. We use it to kiss (which connects people to each other), to eat (which maintains the connection between our body and our soul) and to talk (which, if used properly, can connect people together). That is why people tend to feel connected with each other when they share a meal.

<sup>6</sup> The prohibition of eating food cooked by a non-Jew.