

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Lech Lecha
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Lech Lecha – How to win the lottery

At the end of this week’s Parasha we learn about the mitzva of brit milah. At the age of ninety-nine, Avraham was circumcised together with the male members of his household. Brit milah is almost ubiquitous amongst Jewish males. Even those who are less connected with their Jewish heritage and do not (yet) observe the mitzvot, will (almost) inevitably have a brit. The Jewish people celebrate and rejoice over this mitzva, and it is with us at all times. Why does this particular mitzva have so much mazal?

The Gemara¹ explains. Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel taught that any mitzvah that the Jewish people originally accepted upon themselves with joy, such as the brit milah, they still perform with joy to this day. Rashi on the Gemara brings the example of David Hamelech who was upset when he was in the bathhouse and felt naked from mitzvot (having removed his tzitzit and tefillin). But then he remembered his brit, the eternal covenant of the flesh, and felt happy and relieved.

Rebbe Shimon ben Gamliel then adds that the opposite is also the case. Any mitzvah that the Jewish people originally accepted with contentiousness, such as the prohibition of marrying certain relatives, they still observe contentiously. For there is no ketubah of which the two sides do not quarrel. Rashi² explains that after the Torah was given, some members of Bnei Yisrael were weeping because intermarriage among family members became forbidden to them.³ They saw this restriction as a difficult challenge.⁴ Consequently, until today, marriages may be a source of contention. Even when the families get on very well, there is almost always some underlying tension about the finances, the details of the wedding, the seating arrangements, etc.⁵

¹ Masechet Shabbat, Daf 130a.

² See Rashi to Bamidbar 11:10.

³ Apparently they believed that marriage with a close relative would be more successful because the couple has a similar upbringing and outlook. But some commentators have pointed out that marrying someone who is not so similar to you, while perhaps more challenging, can help each of the marriage partners work on themselves, improve their middot and become better people.

⁴ Some members of Bnei Yisrael were married to relatives that were permitted before Har Sinai, but became forbidden when the Torah was given. However, those existing marriages were allowed to continue (see Gemara Moed Katan 7b based on Devarim 5:27 where Moshe told the Jews to return to their families after the Revelation at Har Sinai, this would include those marriages that had become forbidden). The Meshech Chochmah suggests that this is proof for the principle that converts to Judaism are considered as newborns who are no longer related to their previous relatives. All the Jewish people who stood at Har Sinai ‘became Jewish’ and were in effect treated as converts. Therefore, they were no longer halachically related to their spouses and could stay married.

⁵ I’ve noticed that in Israel, many weddings don’t have a seating list. People just sit wherever they want. It’s a great idea to solve a common source of tension!

This teaches the importance of approaching our Judaism and our mitzva performance with joy and positivity. We saw in last week's Darchai Noam, the well-known opinion of Rav Moshe Feinstein as to why some families who immigrated to America had descendants who remained shomrei Shabbat and others did not. Those immigrants who sat down to the Friday night seuda with joy, despite the likelihood of them losing their job for refusing to work on Shabbat, were more likely to have children who remained faithful to their Yiddishkeit. In other words, the chances of having children that stay on the derech are improved if the children see their parents happy to be Jewish. But how can we access this joy when times are tough?

One approach that might assist us to reach this level of joy is via appreciation.

Most people would be quite happy to win the lottery. It's true that money cannot buy everything. But it's equally true, that there are many problems that just go away if you throw money at them! Unfortunately, the chances of winning the lottery are very low. A statistics expert once quipped that the chance of winning the lottery is almost the same whether or not you buy a ticket!

(Which reminds me of the old joke about the man who was begging Hashem to help him win the lottery and solve his financial problems. After months of pouring out his heart to Hashem at every tefillah a voice boomed down from the Heavens and said: "OK, I heard your prayers and I'm happy to help. But you need to do your part. Please buy a ticket!")

My son's wise schoolteacher used to motivate the boys in his class by reminding them how fortunate they were to be Jewish. There are about 8.1 billion people in the world. Of that number, it is estimated that there are only approximately 16 million Jews. That's just 0.2% of the world population. The chances of being born Jewish are extremely slim.⁶ And what percentage of that number has a real connection with authentic Judaism? With access to learning and education and our beautiful traditions and Torah classes? The odds are very low. If you are Jewish, and you belong to a Jewish community, and you have access to Torah classes and mitzvot, it is as special and unique and amazing as if you won the lottery!

What an opportunity it is to have a relationship with the Creator of the Universe! To be chosen to be Hashem's special children! To have Torah! To have Shabbat to look forward to every week! To have the opportunity to earn Olam Haba! Focusing on this will surely help us become excited to perform Hashem's will. This joy can then keep us going through the most challenging times. And this joy and excitement will then be passed on, down to our children and their children. They too will feel as joyful as if they had won the lottery.

Let's try something this week:

1. Focus on the slim odds of being born Jewish and how lucky you are to be part of a Jewish community.
2. Try to foster joy in the mitzvot and in being Jewish – and then try to communicate this feeling to your children and those around you.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁶ Of course, it's not really about chance. Hashem decides exactly which neshama will be Jewish and which will not. This is just an idea to help us realise how fortunate we are.