

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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

Toldot – The story of Ilfa and R' Yochanan

In this week's Parasha of Toldot, we read about the rivalry between Yaakov and Eisav. Towards the beginning of the Parasha, Eisav agrees to sell his firstborn birthright to Yaakov for a bowl of lentils. At the end of the Parasha, at the behest of Rivkah, Yaakov tricks his father Yitzchak in order to obtain the bracha that Yitzchak intended to give to Eisav. Ultimately, Yaakov is selected to continue the lineage of Avraham Avinu whereas Eisav is excluded from the Jewish people.

It is important to understand that Yitzchak always planned to give two brachot to his sons. One was for success in the physical realm and the other was for success in the spiritual realm. The bracha that Yaakov “stole” only related to the bracha for *physical* success:

“...the dew of the heavens... the fatness of the earth... abundant grain and wine... nations will serve you... be a lord to your brothers”¹.

After Yaakov had “stolen” the bracha for physical success, and just before he was forced to flee from Eisav's anger, Yitzchak summoned Yaakov and gave him another bracha:

“May He grant you the bracha of Avraham, to you and to your offspring with you, that you may possess the land of your sojourns which G-d gave to Avraham”².

This is the *spiritual* bracha that Yitzchak had always intended to give to Yaakov.

Yitzchak thought that ideally Yaakov and Eisav would work in partnership. Together they would carry out the covenant with Hashem and build up the world. Yaakov would be responsible for the spiritual aspects of this Divine mission and Eisav would take care of the physical aspects. That is why Yitzchak thought that Yaakov needed the spiritual bracha and Eisav needed the physical bracha. However, Rivka understood that the wicked Eisav could not be a part of the Jewish people at all. According to Rivka's perspective (which was based on the prophecy that she had received), Yaakov needed both of the brachot.

Two brothers. One was chosen and the other was not. But it could have been different. Eisav could have been part of the Jewish people, joining in the Divine mission to be a light unto the nations and to rectify the world. But he did not merit it.

The Gemara³ provides us with a model story that demonstrates how we each have a Divine mission and how things could have turned out differently for Eisav. The Gemara tells the story of Rebbe Yochanan and Ilfa. In their youth they were students of R' Yehuda HaNasi and they continued to learn together. Impoverished, they both decided to leave full-time Torah learning and set out to earn a livelihood. On their way, they sat down to eat by a run-down wall. Two angels arrived. Rebbe Yochanan overheard one angel saying to the other, “Let us knock over this wall and kill them, for they are leaving the eternal life of Torah study and involving themselves in transitory life”. The other angel responded, “Leave them alone, for there is one of them whose time has come to achieve greatness, and it is not time for him to die”. Rebbe Yochanan concluded that since only he, and not Ilfa, heard the conversation between the angels, they must be referring to him. So he decided to return to the Bet Midrash. Ilfa continued on with his business endeavours. By the time Ilfa came back from his business travels, Rebbe Yochanan had been appointed

¹ Breishit 27:28-29.

² Breishit 28:4.

³ Taanit 21a.

head of the Torah academy and he went on to become the leader of the generation. Some people said to Ilfa that if he had returned earlier, he would have been appointed head instead of Rebbe Yochanan.

Rav Reuven Margoliyos⁴ suggests that both Ilfa and Rebbe Yochanan did exactly what they were supposed to do. The Midrash⁵ says that Rebbe Yochanan owned many assets which he sold in order to continue learning Torah. Ilfa, on the other hand, may have had no assets to sell and no means to support himself. Thus, he made the right choice to support himself in business.

There is a postscript to the story. Ilfa felt that the criticism against him was unjust. In his circumstances, his choice to learn Torah while working for a livelihood, was justified. He wanted to prove to his detractors that his Torah learning had not suffered as a result of his involvement in pursuing a livelihood. He issued a challenge to anyone to ask him a question that he could not answer. They could not. As Rashi writes, "[Ilfa said:] Even though I became involved in commerce, I did not forget any of my learning". Ilfa's teachings are found in both the Talmud Bavli and the Talmud Yerushalmi. We also find Rebbe Yochanan quoting his teachings. Ilfa wasn't chosen, but unlike Eisav, he continued to serve Hashem to the best of his abilities in his own unique way.

This story teaches us that we each have different challenges and roles in life. The pathway for one person is not necessarily the correct one for everyone. Hashem sends us individualized messages. Rebbe Yochanan was the only one who heard the message in the above story because that message was meant specifically for him.

If we hear a message, that means that it is a personal message for us. We are all hearing many stories of the current situation in Israel. Perhaps it is another horrific story from October 7 (which are continuing to filter through). Or maybe it's a heartwarming story, like the story of the nursery in Kibbutz Be'eri, one of the most devastated communities. (The owners of the nursery thought that they had lost their business when they were forced to evacuate. The plants were indoors and needed to be watered. But when they returned, they found that the plants were all alive and well. They found a note which said "Sorry we broke into the nursery, we had to water the plants. With love, the soldiers"⁶). The question is, what message is embedded in each story for us.

If we don't know the meaning of the messages that we are receiving, we can daven to Hashem for the clarity to decipher our own unique messages. How are we personally meant to respond to the messages that we hear? Maybe we are inclined to be lazy, and we need a reminder to do more volunteer work. Perhaps we are naturally stingy, and we are meant to donate more money to those that are suffering as a result of the current situation. We can all surely say an extra chapter of Tehillim.⁷ And we can certainly take on a kabbalah and do some heart-felt teshuva. Each one of us needs to work out for ourselves what it is that we personally are meant to do to fulfil our individual pathway. We must not only decipher the message, but we must also heed the message!

Let's try something this week:

1. Remember that we all have different roles, but each role is a G-d given role and a means to serve Hashem in our own way. Just because we are not chosen to be a Rebbe Yochanan or a Yaacov, doesn't mean that we have to be an Eisav. We can always be an Ilfa.
2. We are all hearing lots of messages these days. If we don't know what the message is for us, we can daven to Hashem for clarity, and ask Him to make the message crystal clear.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁴ In his introduction to Margoliyos ha'Yam.

⁵ Shir ha'Shirim Rabah 8:7.

⁶ See the story here: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/soldiers-break-into-kibbutz-beeris-nursery-to-water-the-plants/>

⁷ People outside of Israel are being asked to make an extra effort to say Tehillim specifically between 2am and 5am Israel time. Most people in Israel are asleep at that time, but the soldiers need our protection 24/7.