

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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

Vayechi – A team of champions or a champion team

This week's Parasha of Vayechi starts with the bracha that Yaakov gave to Yoseph's children, Ephraim and Menashe. At Yaakov's instruction¹, this is the prototype bracha that parents give to their children until today. The Torah provides us with an elaborate, blow-by-blow description of the order in which the brachot took place. Menashe was the older son, thus Yoseph placed Menashe on Yaakov's right side so that he could receive the primary bracha from Yaakov's stronger hand. But Yaakov deliberately switched his hands in order to give Ephraim the primary bracha. When Yoseph asked Yaakov to change the order, Yaakov declined. He explained that even though Menashe would be great, Ephraim would be greater, as one of his descendants would be Yehoshua who would lead Bnei Yisrael into the land of Israel.

The fact that the Torah describes this event in such detail, means that there are important lessons to be derived from it. The Bnei Yissachar says that there were two possible negative outcomes to Yaakov favouring Ephraim over Menashe. Menashe could have been jealous of his younger brother, and Ephraim could have become haughty and looked down upon his older brother. Due to the greatness of Menashe and Ephraim, neither of these possibilities occurred.

Yaakov favoured Yoseph over his other sons, and the results were not good. As the Gemara² teaches:

A person should never treat one son differently than his other sons. For on account of two selaim's weight of fine wool that Yaakov gave to Yosef in excess of what he gave his other sons, his brothers became jealous of him, and which eventually resulted in the sale of Yosef and our forefathers descending to Mitzrayim.

One might ask - how could Yaakov make the same mistake again? By favouring Ephraim over Menashe, wasn't Yaakov risking the same cycle of jealousy? But perhaps the Torah is teaching us that Yaakov was not making a mistake. Ephraim had a different role to play in the history of Bnei Yisrael and he needed the appropriate bracha to help him fulfil that role. We are all different and we are treated differently. That is a fact of life. It is up to us ensure that those differences do not lead to jealousy or haughtiness. The Torah holds up Menashe and Ephraim as perfect examples of how we are supposed to react to these natural differences between people.

How can we achieve this level that Ephraim and Menashe achieved and not feel jealousy or haughtiness in the face of discrepancies between us and our neighbours?

The first truth that we can strive to internalise is that no role is any better or worse than another, they are just different. Each person's tafkid (purpose) is vital and unique to them. Each person should focus on their own role and responsibilities in order for the Jewish nation (and the world) to function properly.

We can explain this with the help of an analogy that (unfortunately) we are all very familiar with. When an army goes to war, there are different roles which must be fulfilled. We need ground troops, we need pilots, and we need cooks. And not everyone can be the Chief of Staff. The army works well only if everyone fulfils their role as best as possible. The Chofetz Chaim provides a beautiful parable to draw out this point.

The general was touring the front lines to check on the conditions of his troops. He saw that the soldiers were in reasonably good spirits, but they were all hungry and were feeling weak. Upon further investigation he saw that the cook had abandoned his post. He finally discovered the cook on the front line with a rifle. The cook thought that the general would be proud of him for helping the war effort in a direct manner. But of course the general was not happy at all. The cook had an important role to play, and he was not fulfilling it. If the soldiers were not fed they could not fight effectively.

If the cook had realised the fundamental importance of his role he would not have been jealous of the role of the soldiers on the front line. Similarly, the soldiers realised that they need to eat in order to fight effectively, and thus should not look down on the role of the cook.

The second (and related) way we can minimise competitiveness between each other is to focus on the fact that we are all one people, Hashem's chosen people. When we focus on the group and not ourselves as individuals, we will naturally feel less jealous and less haughty.

¹ See Breishit 48:20.

² Shabbat Daf 10b.

We can bring another analogy from the sporting field. It is often stated that a champion team is better than a team of champions. A team made up of individual superstars who put their individual goals first and each want to be in the limelight, will struggle to beat a team of good players who have played together, understand their individual roles, and share a common team goal.

In the aftermath of the October 7 massacre, we have seen Jews all over the world come together in unity to defeat our enemy, each fulfilling their unique roles. We all need each other in order to function optimally:

- The brave soldiers who are battling Hamas directly under dangerous conditions.
- The computer experts sitting in Tel Aviv, guiding drones to assist the ground forces.
- The people around the world who are donating time and money to assist the war effort.
- The students on campuses around the world standing up to antisemitism and those attending rallies and contributing other efforts to supporting Israel.
- The yeshiva students from the South who were forced to leave their homes but continue to learn uninterrupted around the country in temporary accommodation.
- The Yeshivot and others who are hosting the displaced Yeshiva students from the South, giving them beds, meals and even taking care of their laundry, so that they can continue learning.
- The busy mothers raising their families while their husbands are away on duty.
- The mother of the hostage that was tragically killed by friendly fire who sent a heartwarming message to the responsible soldiers saying "Please don't feel bad. We don't blame you. We love you. Look after yourselves and continue to protect us."³
- The volunteers (many of whom are in their 70s or even older) who flew to Israel from the other side of the world to pack boxes and make sandwiches for the soldiers.

Each of us has a unique role to fulfil. And when we work together and focus on treating others well, we will be victorious.

The following idea is one that we have already mentioned a number of times in the past. But this idea is so important that it is worth repeating.

The Midrash in Vayikra Raba compares the generation of King David with the generation of King Achav (the seventh king of the northern kingdom of Israel). In the time of King David, all of the people were righteous and learned in Torah. Yet, they suffered heavy casualties when they went to war. In contrast, the generation of King Achav worshipped avodah zara. However, they suffered very few casualties when they went out to war. The Midrash explains that this was because the people in King Achav's kingdom were united and behaved respectfully towards each other, and they thus merited a special Divine protection. Thus, we see that Hashem loves achdut and is pleased when His children act properly to each other. This is like a parent that feels nachas when they see their children being kind to each other.

Of course, we want the best of both worlds. We want to be righteous like the generation of David HaMelech and we want to be united like the generation of Achav. And that is what we must work towards. B'ezrat Hashem we will continue to work towards this level and achieve it. But meanwhile, at the absolute minimum, we need to focus on our achdut to ensure that we have the maximum Heavenly protection during these dangerous times.

Thus, we have a double-pronged approach to emulate Menashe and Ephraim. First, try to focus on and remember that we all have our unique role and our unique resources and talents. Second, to remember that we, as part of the Jewish people, are all part of the same team and we all need each other. These tools should help us to overcome any problems of jealousy and haughtiness, just like Menashe and Ephraim were able to.

We can't all be champions, but we can all be part of a champion team. But first and foremost, we need to remember that we are part of a team. Then Hashem will see our unity and Ahavat Yisrael and, B'ezrat Hashem, the victory will come quickly.

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to notice when you feel tinges of jealousy or haughtiness. To combat these feelings, remind yourself that we are all unique and play an integral role in the Jewish people, one that is no greater or worse than anyone else.
2. Remember that you are part of a champion team, Hashem's chosen people, a team that has been around for thousands of years!

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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³ It goes without saying that Hamas bear full responsibility for this tragedy. They have been setting up cruel ambushes (such as setting up mannequins to look like hostages and playing recordings of babies crying and people talking in Hebrew) to lure our soldiers into deadly boobytraps.