

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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

Vayeshev – Esav, Lavan and Yosef

This week's Parasha starts with the words 'וישב יעקב' (Yaakov settled). Yaakov had been through many years of struggles and difficulties. First, he had to deal with the hatred of his brother Eisav after 'stealing' the brachot. He had to escape for his life and run to Haran where he had to deal with his conniving and dishonest uncle Lavan. Then he had to encounter Eisav once again on his way back. Finally, after more than 30 years on the run, he has returned home to the land of Canaan. He is expecting to be able to finally relax.

Rashi, quoting the Midrash¹, teaches us that Yaakov was looking forward to settling down in tranquillity. But before he could feel too comfortable, he is confronted by the difficulties of Yosef's kidnapping. The Midrash says: The righteous seek tranquillity, but Hashem says, "Are the righteous not satisfied with what is stored up for them in the World to Come, that they wish to live at ease in this world too?"

Yaakov is to face a final nisayon. We are given a hint to Yaakov's final challenge in Parashat Toldot, where we read about Rivkah encouraging Yaakov to impersonate Eisav in order to get the brachot. At first, Yaakov was concerned that Yitzchak would discover the deception and thus give Yaakov a curse instead of a bracha. Rivkah convinced her son to go ahead with the plan by offering to accept any curses upon herself. She used the words: 'עלי קללתך בני' (your curse shall be upon me my son).

The Vilna Gaon teaches us that the word 'עלי' can be seen as an acronym for עשו (Eisav), לבן (Lavan) and יוסף (Yosef). These are the three great challenges that Yaakov would face over the course of his life. Rivkah saw with Divine Inspiration that Yaakov would have to overcome these three tests. When she used the word 'עלי', she was cryptically conveying the three curses that would befall him. By deceiving his father Yitzchak, like Rivkah was asking him to do, Yaakov would not bring upon himself any extra curses. But no matter what happens, he will have to face these three challenges.

The purpose of this world is to struggle. In last week's Parasha, we learnt why Yaakov's name was changed to Yisrael: "Your name shall no longer be called Yaakov, but Yisrael, because you have struggled (שרית) with Hashem and with man and you have prevailed".² But the name Yisrael contains a derivative of the word 'struggle' rather than the word for 'prevail' or 'succeed', because that is the focus. It is not about finishing the job, it is about putting in the effort to constantly improve. Life is supposed to be all about the struggle.

Certainly, when Yaakov was looking for some tranquillity, he wasn't looking to just pass the time idly and enjoy himself. This was the same Yaakov that learnt in the Yeshiva of Shem and Ever with such intensity that he did not lie down to sleep in a bed for 14 years!³ No doubt Yaakov was looking forward to some quiet time so that he could focus on growing spiritually and learning Torah with his children. But Hashem decided that it was not yet time for that. There was still another challenge he had to face.

We can learn from this event and apply it to our own lives. We have to remember that our challenges and struggles in this world are for our benefit. They help to refine us and make us into even better

¹ Breishit Rabbah 84:3.

² Breishit 32:29.

³ See Rashi to Breishit 28:11.

people. We all know this message, but it is worth repeating again and again until we fully internalise it. In the words of the Ramchal:⁴

“That is why two worlds were created: This World and the World to Come. This World, its environment and its laws of nature – these are what are appropriate for people during the entire time of their efforts. And the World to Come, its environment and its laws – these are what are appropriate at the time for receiving reward.”

Rest and relaxation do have an important role to play, but they are not an end in themselves.

There was once a yeshiva student who wrote a letter to the Chazon Ish.⁵ He was a very serious student. He asked the Gadol Hador some complicated questions about the Gemara that he was learning that he was struggling to understand. In his letter, he also noted that he felt tired and demotivated. He then wrote about his plans to learn during Ben Hazmanim (the holiday period when yeshivot are traditionally closed). The Chazon Ish wrote back and told him in no uncertain terms that he needs to relax during Ben Hazmanim. He explained the importance of ‘down time’ to recharge and rejuvenate. He instructed the boy to go on day trips and spend time having fun with his friends. He also held back from answering the boy’s questions in learning. He explained: “I know that you are a serious student. If I answer your questions, you will immerse yourself in looking up all of the sources and trying to understand the topic to the best of your ability. Now is not the time for that. Now is the time to rest so that you can come back to Yeshiva with energy and positivity”.

Rest and relaxation have their place but only as a means to an end. They are a tool that should be used to help us to continue struggling and growing and improving. If we lose focus and make pleasure the goal, Hashem might need to send us reminders that we are in this world to work on ourselves. If we have the right perspective, we may not need those reminders. When we are blessed with a period of tranquillity, and things are quiet, we should take advantage of that time to actively involve ourselves in self-improvement. When we feel well-rested and energetic, that is the time to think about what we can work on, what else can we take on, which middot need extra work and which mitzvot have room for improvement (probably all of them!).

Unfortunately, our nature is such that we don’t actively seek to work on ourselves, but rather embrace the status quo. When we enjoy periods of relative tranquillity we tend to cease working on our middot and often end up with in-fighting between Jews.

We saw a similar concept playing out before and after the events of October 7. We had a period of (relative) tranquillity which was unfortunately marred by a lot of divisiveness. Many Jewish people were not treating each other with due respect. Unfortunately, it took the tragic events of October 7 to wake us all up and remind us that we are one, and to put aside our petty differences. Baruch Hashem we now see many acts of love, unity and brotherhood. There are so many beautiful stories of self-sacrifice and the spirit of giving and generosity. We are kinder to each other and more caring. What a pity that we couldn’t learn this message before October 7. But that’s history. Let’s focus on the future and make sure that we keep it up, even when, b’ezrat Hashem, we return to tranquillity very soon.

Let’s try something this week:

1. When we are facing challenges, remember that these challenges are tailor made for us by Hashem. Instead of complaining, we should try our best to grow and learn from the experience.
2. When times are peaceful, we can try to overcome our nature and use this opportunity to redouble our efforts in areas of self-improvement.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁴ Derech Hashem 1:3:4.

⁵ I heard this story many years ago, some of the details may not be accurate, but the meaning is clear.