

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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

Vayishlach – Another perspective

In this week's Parasha of Vayishlach, we read about Yaakov's confrontation with his brother Eisav. At their previous interaction, more than thirty years earlier, Eisav had wanted to kill Yaakov for 'stealing' the brachot. Yaakov did not know for sure whether Eisav's feelings had mellowed over the years, but he knew that Eisav was heading towards him with an army of 400 strong men. Yaakov prepared in three ways for the upcoming confrontation with Eisav – tefillah, sending gifts, and preparing himself for battle.¹

After dividing his family into separate camps (so that if one camp was attacked, the others could escape) Yaakov went on ahead of them to approach Eisav:

“Then he himself went on ahead of them (והוא עבר לפניהם) and bowed to the ground seven times until he reached his brother.” (Breishit 33:3)

Yaakov acted in a very subservient manner towards Eisav. He called Eisav 'my lord' and he referred to himself as 'your servant'. And he bowed seven times to the ground in front of Eisav. Yaakov was using all prudent measures at his disposal to appease Eisav and save the lives of his family. This was a case of potential pikuach nefesh, and there was no question that he had to do whatever he could. But let's imagine what was going through Yaakov's mind while he was interacting this way and bowing down to the ground in front of his brother. Yaakov was the chosen one, the father of the twelve tribes who were charged with being Hashem's representatives in this world. Whereas Eisav was the epitome of evil and idolatry. Surely we might assume that bowing down in this self-effacing manner was a humiliating experience for Yaakov.

Rav Dessler,² based on the Zohar, provides us with a totally different perspective. The first three words of the pasuk we quoted above (והוא עבר לפניהם) are usually understood as referring to Yaakov. After dividing his family into camps, 'he [Yaakov] went ahead of them' and approached Eisav. But the Zohar understands that those words are referring to the Divine Presence, which was passing at that moment before them. Yaakov could sense, this and at this time of danger he bowed seven times to Hashem, until he approached Eisav. Rav Dessler explains that the pesukim do not actually say that Yaakov bowed to Eisav. Yaakov would only ever give such honour to Hashem. To the outside observer, it seemed like Yaakov was bowing to Eisav. But in reality, Yaakov was bowing to Hashem, the only one to Whom we should be subservient.

Yaakov was able to bring Hashem in and feel His Presence. He could see Hashem behind the might of his enemy. Rav Dessler suggests that this is why Hashem's Presence passed before them at precisely that time. Yaakov saw the Hand of Hashem behind all worldly power. And that is Who he was bowing down to.

We read of a similar incident towards the end of Yaakov's life, in Parashat Vayechi. Yaakov asked his son Yoseph, the viceroy of Egypt, to ensure that Yaakov's body would be buried in the family tomb in Eretz Yisrael. Yoseph swore that he would personally attend to it. Yaakov then bowed down in gratitude. Though Yoseph was a great Tzaddik, and in no way comparable to Eisav, he was still Yaakov's son. Ordinarily it would not be appropriate for a father to bow down to his son. But Rashi explains, based on the Gemara:³ “When the fox is in its hour, bow down to it”. In other words, when circumstances require it, we sometimes need to show respect to someone who is inferior to us.

¹ See Ramban's commentary to the first pasuk in our Parasha - Breishit 32:4.

² Rav Dessler on the Parasha, Feldheim Publishers, 2004, Parashat Vayishlach, pp 147-151 (taken from Michtav MiEliyahu III pp155-157).

³ Megillah 16b.

But Rashi also brings an alternative explanation of this incident, based on the Midrash.⁴ He explains that Yaakov was nearing death⁵ and the Divine Presence appears at the head of a sick person. Thus, Yaakov was really bowing down to Hashem, not to Yosef. Yaakov felt grateful to Hashem that all of his sons turned out righteous, including Yosef, who was captured amongst the gentiles. So, to the outside observer, Yaakov was expressing gratitude to his son, the Egyptian viceroy. But according to this other perspective, Yaakov was bowing down in gratitude to the Ultimate Source, in recognition of His being behind everything.

This same idea can also be used to explain an astounding episode that appears on the same Daf in the Gemara referenced above.⁶ The Gemara takes us to Shushan, and the climax of the Purim story. Esther's plan to overcome Haman was almost complete. She had invited Haman and the King Achashverosh to a second intimate party, and she was planning to reveal Haman's wicked plan to Achashverosh and beg for deliverance for the Jewish people. The Gemara describes the dramatic exposure of Haman:

*“And Esther said: An adversary and enemy is this wicked Haman” (Esther 7:6). R' Elazar said: This teaches that she was in fact pointing toward Achashverosh, indicating that in fact he was an adversary and enemy, and an angel came and pushed her hand toward Haman.*⁷

This is inexplicable! What was Esther thinking? She finally had a chance to expose Haman to Achashverosh and instead she tried to point to Achashverosh himself and accuse him of being an enemy!⁸

This question is answered by the Rema MiPano⁹ and the Vilna Gaon in his commentary to that verse in Megillat Esther. They explain that, though Esther physically appeared to be speaking to Achashverosh, in her mind and heart she was speaking directly to Hashem. She was praying for Divine assistance. She was so focused on Hashem, in such a state of deveikut, that she literally forgot where she was. She heard a voice saying, “Who is this and where is he, who dared to do this?” (which was actually said by Achashverosh himself)¹⁰, and she instinctively pointed to Achashverosh. She was praying to Hashem and telling Him that Achashverosh was trying to kill her people. She was begging Hashem to save the Jewish people from this wicked monarch. An angel had to come and redirect her finger towards Haman!¹¹

Once again, we have an external and internal perspective. To the outside observer, Esther was talking to Achashverosh. But in reality, she was talking to Hashem. The Rema MiPano describes this as a trait of the righteous. Though they may appear to be speaking to people, often they are really praying to Hashem.

Sometimes it is hard to see Hashem behind events, especially when those events are horrific and appear to be inexplicable. When times are traumatic, it is hard to reconcile that with our knowledge that Hashem is good, kind and just. But we can work on adopting an inner perspective and realising that He is there. He is always there, waiting for us to connect with Him. Let's strive to look deeper and try to connect with Him.

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to focus on the idea that Hashem is behind everything. He is Omnipotent and Omniscient. We all know it in theory, but it is easy to forget when we are caught up in life.
2. Speak to Hashem during the day. Call out to Him. Ask Him for help. Not just during the fixed tefillot. You can do this out loud or in your thoughts.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁴ Midrash Tanchuma 3.

⁵ See Breishit 47:29.

⁶ Megillah 16a.

⁷ R' Elazar understands that the reference to Haman was almost an afterthought. Esther first said 'איש צר ואיב' (an adversary and an enemy) and tried to point to Achashverosh. After the angel pushed her hand towards Haman, she added the words 'המן הרע הזה' (this wicked Haman).

⁸ The Gemara brings a disagreement between Rav and Shmuel as to whether Achashverosh was wise or a fool. Either way, he was certainly complicit in Haman's wicked plans and deserved to be punished.

⁹ Rav Menachem Azariah da Fano (1548 – 1620), in his Asara Ma'amarot Em Kol Chai 1:7.

¹⁰ Esther 7:5.

¹¹ This idea is sourced in the Zohar I p. 171b, (which was referenced by Rav Dessler above). The Zohar provides another example of this phenomenon - when David was speaking to Naval (Shmuel Aleph 25:6), he was really speaking to Hashem.