

# DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

## “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Vaera  
January 2024 / Shvat 5784

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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

### Vaera – “Pharaoh Ten Times”

In this week's Parasha of Vaera, we read about seven of the plagues. Moshe requests from Pharaoh permission for Bnei Yisrael to leave Mitzrayim. Each time Pharaoh refuses, and the Egyptians are hit with a plague. Pharaoh then consents to let Bnei Yisrael leave. But when the plague stops, Pharaoh withdraws his consent. Sometimes Pharaoh changes his mind by himself, and sometimes he needs a little help from Hashem Who hardens his heart.<sup>1</sup> But after each of the first nine plagues, Pharaoh ultimately refuses to let Bnei Yisrael go.

There is a children's book called “The Story of Danny Three Times”, by Leibel Edrin. It tells the story of a little boy called Danny who would not listen. His parents had to say everything three times. This was a very frustrating situation for Danny's parents. The book tells the story of the efforts that Danny's parents go to in order to solve the problem and teach Danny to listen the first time he is told.

Pharaoh makes Danny Three Times look like child's play. Pharaoh had to be told **ten** times before he finally listened! And he constantly said yes and then changed his mind. Imagine how frustrating this must have been for Moshe. Yet, remarkably, Moshe was able to keep his cool almost the entire time. (It was only at the very end, before the 10<sup>th</sup> plague in next week's Parasha, that we see an emotional response from Moshe.<sup>2</sup>)

How did Moshe manage to keep his cool for so long?

We will now present a number of ideas from various sources that may help us to avoid frustration and anger in challenging circumstances.

In his many books, Rabbi Zelig Pliskin provides a lot of practical advice on how to improve our family life. In a chapter entitled “Living in the Present”<sup>3</sup>, he writes as follows:

*“If you need to repeat yourself, live in the present. Ask the tenth time with the same patience as the first time.<sup>4</sup> This skill takes time to develop. But marriage and child-raising give you many opportunities for practice.”*

Rabbi Pliskin advises that we try to live our lives in the present. We should focus on the fact that, regardless of what happened in the past, we can all make new and better choices right now. If we have that mindset, it can help to reduce frustration. Rabbi Pliskin admits that this is not easy, but it is achievable.

The Iggeret Hakodesh, by the Baal HaTanya, also provides excellent advice as to how we can avoid getting angry. He writes that at the time of anger, one's faith is removed, since if he believed that the situation emanated from Hashem, he would not be angry at all. He writes:

*And even though a person, who has free will, curses or strikes him, or damages his property, and is responsible by human law and by Heavenly law for the evil in his choice, nevertheless, the injured party already has such a result decreed against him in Heaven and Hashem has many messengers to carry it out.*

He then gives the example of a frustrating situation where a non-Jew is speaking and distracting someone while he is trying to daven. What is the appropriate response in such a situation?

<sup>1</sup> There is a lot of discussion in the commentators about why Hashem hardened Pharaoh's heart, apparently removing his free will and thus causing him to be punished further. Amongst the explanations offered, some suggest that this was a punishment for Pharaoh's heinous sins in the past (Rambam). Others suggest that Hashem hardened Pharaoh's heart in order to ensure that he could exercise his free will despite the devastating plagues (Ramban).

<sup>2</sup> “...And he left Pharaoh's presence in a burning anger” (Parashat Bo, Shmot 11:8).

<sup>3</sup> Chapter 8 of his book “Marriage”, page 354.

<sup>4</sup> I wonder if he was thinking of the story of Pharaoh when he wrote ‘the tenth time’...

*"[He should realise that] this is only so that he should gird himself and strengthen himself more in his tefilla with depth from the heart and with tremendous concentration such that he doesn't hear the words of the non-Jew. But this needs great and strong arousal... through this distraction, a person is aroused to pray with more kavana from the depths of the heart."*

The Iggeret Hakodesh is advising us to focus not on the liability of the other person, but rather the fact that everything that happens, including via another person, is really from Hashem<sup>5</sup>. We have to realise that Hashem decided that we needed to experience the frustration. And ideally, we should use the situation as an opportunity to develop our middot and improve ourselves.

The Chofetz Chaim, in his book "Ahavat Chessed"<sup>6</sup> discusses the case of a person who performed the mitzva of lending someone money but then struggled to get the borrower to repay the money. As a result, the person has decided to stop lending money in fulfilment of this mitzva. The Chofetz Chaim writes, "This is not a logical argument. If one person has proven himself to be wicked, does this make all Jews a bad risk?" As for the person who defaulted on his loan, there are two possibilities – if he has the means to repay and withholds the money, then possibly one is not bound to lend him money again in the future. If the person became impoverished and cannot repay, then if he requests another loan in the future, the lender has the right to insist on security being provided as a condition to providing the loan. The Chofetz Chaim also writes at length about the importance of the mitzva of lending to someone in need and the great reward that awaits someone who is able to fulfil it.

Thus, the Chofetz Chaim is advising us to look at the situation logically, to focus on the reward for the mitzva, and to put things into perspective. One can take reasonable measures to protect themselves in the future from such problematic behaviour. And certainly, one should not forgo an important mitzva with its great reward due to frustrations that one experienced in the past.

If we look back to last week's Parasha, we will see a fundamental reason why Moshe was able to stay calm in the face of Pharaoh's very trying behaviour. Hashem gave Moshe a final message before he left Midian for Mitzrayim:

*Hashem said to Moshe, "When you go to return to Mitzrayim, see all the wonders that I have put in your hand and perform them before Pharaoh, but I shall strengthen his heart and he will not send out the people. You shall say to Pharaoh, "So said Hashem, my firstborn son is Israel. So I say to you, send out My son that he may serve Me – but you have refused to send him out, behold I shall kill your firstborn son".*

The Or HaChaim notes that this prophecy about the death of the firstborn was not given to Pharaoh until just before the tenth plague. However, Hashem told it to Moshe right at the outset so that Moshe would know what to expect. That would help him to withstand the long period of frustration that he was destined to face when Pharaoh would repeatedly change his mind and refuse to give in.

If, like Moshe, we had a message from Hashem that things would be difficult at first, but that everything would work out OK in the end, it would give us much needed fortitude to face difficulties and frustrations. And we do have such a message! We know that Hashem is in charge and that everything that He does is for the best. And we have countless messages from the prophets<sup>7</sup> that remind us to look forward to the end of days when evil will be removed from the world, the Bet Hamikdash will be rebuilt, and we will all rejoice in Hashem's Presence. We know it will be OK in the end, we just need to avoid feeling frustrated and wait patiently.

Let's try something this week:

1. Remember that we have been promised by Hashem's prophets countless times that things will be good in the end. Try to use this Divine guarantee to help us through the difficult times.
2. When we face frustrations and difficulties, try to use them as opportunities to increase our patience and develop our middot.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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<sup>5</sup> There is a much bigger philosophical question here, namely, can a person exercise his free will to seriously harm (or even kill) someone when Hashem didn't decree that it should happen? This question is discussed by the great authorities and now is not the place to enter into that discussion. For the purpose of this article, we are only dealing with situations that are 'mildly annoying or frustrating'.

<sup>6</sup> "Loving Kindness", see chapter 9.

<sup>7</sup> There are too many examples to even begin to list them, but a good place to start is the Haftarot of consolation that we read in the weeks following Tisha B'Av.