

## DARCHAI NOAM

### Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם

(Mishlei 3:17)

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[darchai.noam@gmail.com](mailto:darchai.noam@gmail.com)

How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

### Vayetzei – The proper approach to physical possessions

This week's Parsha of Vayetzei begins with Yaakov fleeing from Eisav his brother towards the wicked Lavan. He is running for his life but his destination is not exactly a safe haven! On his way, Yaakov stops for the night and experiences his famous dream of the ladder reaching up to heaven. Hashem appears to Yaakov and re-affirms that he will receive the covenantal blessings of the land of Canaan and numerous offspring. Yaakov awakens from his sleep and builds an alter to Hashem. Yaakov then takes a vow which includes a prayerful request to Hashem:

*"Then Yaakov made a vow, saying: 'If Hashem will be with me, and He will guard me on this way that I am going, **and He will give me bread to eat and clothes to wear** and if I return in peace to my father's house and Hashem will be my G-d, then this stone which I have placed as a monument shall be a house of G-d and everything that You give me I will surely tithe to you.'" (Breishit 28:20-22)*

Yaakov is about to enter the household of Lavan where he will be subjected to wicked and immoral influences. So why is he asking for material wealth? We can understand that Yaakov is praying for Hashem to guard over him and to return him safely to his father's house. Yet right in the middle of this prayer Yaakov asks for food and clothes. We would expect him to ask for things of a more spiritual nature.

The same question arises in next week's Parsha when Yaakov has the famous struggle with the angel the night before he confronts his brother Eisav. Yaakov had transferred his entire camp across the river and he is left alone on the other side of the river when he meets the angel. Why was Yaakov alone? Rashi explains:

*"He [Yaakov] had forgotten some small earthenware vessels [on the other side of the river] and he returned for them." (Rashi to Breishit 32:25)*

Again we see that Yaakov seems to be prioritising his physical possessions. He travels across the river by himself at night merely to retrieve a few cheap earthenware vessels.

However, a deeper investigation of both incidents may provide us with a deeper appreciation for the proper approach that we should have towards our physical possessions.

Let's take a closer look at the specific wording of Yaakov's request to Hashem as he is fleeing towards Lavan's house. Yaakov asks for "bread **to eat**" and "clothes **to wear**". This is actually not a request for material wealth. Rather, Yaakov is only asking Hashem to satisfy his basic necessities. He needs food to eat and he needs clothes to wear for survival (and in order to serve Hashem). That is all that he is asking for – nothing more and nothing less.

We can now try to understand why Yaakov was concerned about recovering his cheap earthenware vessels. Yaakov measured his purchases very carefully. Nothing was purchased flippantly (because it was on sale or because it would look great on his mantelpiece). A Tzaddik acquires only acquisitions that are indispensable. Yaakov did not

waste time or effort acquiring material possessions that were unnecessary. He understood the value and the purpose of time and possessions – it is all to be used simply to serve Hashem.

Let's have a deeper look at the concept of material possessions. Chazal teach us that to really understand any concept in the Torah we need to look at the first place that the subject is mentioned. The first time that the Torah mentions Bnei Yisrael's wealth is when they leave Mitzrayim.<sup>1</sup> Hashem tells Moshe to ask Bnei Yisrael to **borrow** silver and gold vessels from the Egyptians before they depart from Egypt.<sup>2</sup> This was in order to fulfil Hashem's promise to Avraham Avinu that his descendants would leave Mitzrayim with great wealth. However, the question arises as to why the term "borrow" is used. Bnei Yisrael had no intention of returning these vessels to the Egyptians. The vessels were a small token of compensation for the many years of slave labour that the Jewish people had performed for the Egyptians. We would think that the Torah would have used the word "take" instead of "borrow".

The Chiddushei HaRim explains that the term "borrow" was not being used to indicate that the vessels were being borrowed from the Egyptians. From the perspective of the Egyptians, the vessels were being taken permanently. Rather, the term "borrow" was being used in relation to **Hashem**. Bnei Yisrael were merely borrowing these items from Hashem. Since Bnei Yisrael were obtaining an abundance of wealth for the first time, they needed to learn the proper approach that they should have towards their possessions. In reality, everything belongs to Hashem. We have material possessions, as well as our bodies, our families, our breath, our life – it is all on loan from Hashem. He can take it away in a second. He has decided to put us in charge, temporarily, of our material possessions.

The story is told of a courier that is delivering a cargo of precious jewels. He proudly shows off his 'wealth' to his family and friends. However the courier is acting foolishly. Everyone knows that the precious jewels do not belong to the courier. He has merely been entrusted with them and instructed to deliver them to their destination.

The message for us is clear. Many of us spend far too much of our time and energy on acquiring possessions. This time and energy is invaluable – it could be spent serving Hashem and caring about others. We need to remember the lesson from Yaakov – we only really need the minimum amount with which to serve Hashem. And everything that we do have is merely borrowed from Hashem, so we must take care of it and use it for the proper purpose.

Let's try something this week:

1. Notice how much time and energy we devote to acquiring possessions. Try to redirect some of that time and energy to fulfilling mitzvot.
2. Take good care of everything that we have been entrusted with and use it for a good purpose, because ultimately we are only looking after it temporarily.
3. It is always worth keeping in mind Hillel's famous dictum: "One who increases his possessions increases his worries" (Pirkei Avot 2:8).

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Ledder.

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<sup>1</sup> This idea was heard from Rav Moshe Donnebaum.

<sup>2</sup> Shmot 11:2.

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## **About D archai Noam**

The passuk in Mishlei (3:17) describes the Torah as follows: "Its ways are ways of pleasantness (Darchai Noam) and all its paths are peace". The Torah is our guidebook for life. It is packed full of good advice as to how we should live our lives.

The aim of the Darchai Noam weekly email is to examine an idea from the weekly parashah that usually relates to good middot (character traits). It will focus particularly on treating each other with respect and how to interact with each other in a more peaceful and pleasant manner. It will also suggest some practical tips for implementing these ideas in our daily lives.

By learning together each week, and making an effort to regularly put the ideas into practice, with Hashem's help we can all gradually improve our character traits and our observance of 'v'ahavta l'reiacha kamocho' – loving one's fellow as oneself.

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