

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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

Toldot – Sunrise, sunset

In this week's Parasha of Toldot, we read about Yitzchak and Rivkah finally being blessed with children, after twenty years of waiting.

Three of our matriarchs, Sarah, Rivka and Rachel, were initially barren. Only Leah was able to conceive without difficulty, but the pasuk¹ tells us that this was a special case. Hashem saw that Rachel was the favoured wife, so He opened Leah's womb as a form of consolation. Why did the other matriarchs have such difficulty conceiving? The Gemara² explains that Hashem made them infertile because He desires the prayers of the righteous. This may seem difficult to understand. Surely Hashem did not make these righteous women suffer for His own enjoyment!?!

The answer to this question focuses on the benefit of prayer when beset by a nisayon. There is no comparison between one's tefillot during a time of relative comfort and ease and one's tefillot that come from a place of suffering and challenges. When one is in a very difficult situation, their tefillot come from a very deep place, a place that one cannot usually access. Such tefillot can change a person in a profound way. They can help a person to reach closer to Hashem. Intense need stimulates better tefillah, which is good for us. Hashem desires the prayers of the righteous because He wants us to be able to reach that deep inner place and thereby improve ourselves and connect to Him in the deepest way we can.

And Yitzchak entreated (וַיַּעֲתָר) Hashem opposite his wife because she was barren, and Hashem accepted his prayers, and Rivkah his wife conceived. (Breishit 25:21)

In his commentary to the above pasuk, Rashi tells us that Yitzchak and Rivkah would pray together, one in one corner of the room, and the other one in the other corner. But it was Yitzchak's prayers that were finally accepted. Why? Because we cannot compare the prayers of a tzaddik the child of a tzaddik (i.e. Yitzchak the son of Avraham) to a tzaddik the son of a wicked person (i.e. Rivkah the daughter of Betuel). Rashi explains that Hashem 'allowed' Himself to be entreated and swayed by Yitzchak's tefillot.

Yitzchak's tefillah is described as וַיַּעֲתָר (Vayetar). Vayetar is derived from the word 'eter' which means pitchfork. The Gemara³ takes note of this word 'Vayetar' and analyses Yitzchak's tefillah:

“Rebbe Elazar said: “Why are the tefillot of tzadikim compared to a pitchfork?” This is to teach us that just as the pitchfork turns over the grain that is on a threshing floor, and tosses it from one place to another, so too the tefillot of tzadikim turn over, so to speak, the attitude of Hashem from the Attribute of Harsh Judgment to the Attribute of Mercy.”

Why did it take Yitzchak twenty years to get Hashem 'over the line' and agree to give them children? Surely the prayer of the righteous Yitzchak could have been answered more quickly.⁴ Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnefeld⁵ answered this question by bringing a story that happened to the Chatam Sofer.

¹ Parashat Vayetze, Breishit 29:31.

² Yevamot 64a.

³ Sukkot 14a.

⁴ The following is adapted from an idea that I saw in “Short Vort” by Rabbi Moshe Kormornick (page 22).

⁵ 1848-1932, chief rabbi of Jerusalem and co-founder of the Edah HaChareidit.

A righteous couple that lived near the Chatam Sofer were experiencing a very long and difficult labour. The husband ran to the Chatam Sofer and asked for a bracha that his wife should have a quick and easy birth. The Chatam Sofer apologised and said that he was unable to give such a bracha. The man did not question the Chatam Sofer and returned to his wife. Finally, after much suffering, a healthy boy was born, and all was well. The husband returned to the Chatam Sofer to tell him the good news. The Chatam Sofer was delighted. The man then asked why the Chatam Sofer refused to pray for a quick birth. The Chatam Sofer quoted the Gemara⁶ which states: "While Rabbi Akiva was dying, Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi was born; while Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi was dying, Rav Yehuda was born; while Rav Yehuda was dying, Rava was born; while Rava was dying, Rav Ashi was born. This teaches you that a tzaddik does not leave the world before another tzaddik is created to replace him, as it is stated: "The sun rises and the sun sets" (Kohelet 1:5). The Chatam Sofer explained that this couple was very righteous and their son would surely be a great tzaddik. Thus, by praying for their son to be born earlier, the Chatam Sofer would be causing the premature death of a tzaddik somewhere in the world.

Rav Sonnenfeld used this story to explain why Yitzchak's prayers took so long to be answered. We have a tradition that each of the Avot should have lived for 180 years. Yitzchak, the perfect offering, was the only one of the Avot that achieved this age. Yaakov passed away at the age of 147 and Chazal felt the need to explain why he lost 33 years⁷. Avraham also did not reach 180 years but rather passed away at the age of 175, five years early. Rashi⁸ explains that Hashem had promised Avraham that he would live to a "good old age". However, at a certain point, Avraham's grandson Eisav started to become evil. Hashem did not want Avraham to live to see Eisav's downturn, as that would not constitute the "good" old age that Hashem had promised. Therefore, Hashem caused Avraham to die 5 years earlier. When we trace the logic back, we realise that the sooner that Yitzchak's son Eisav would be born, the sooner that Avraham would have to die. That is why Hashem needed to be 'persuaded' to allow Rivkah to conceive, and why he delayed answering the request for so many years.

Rav Sonnenfeld supports this argument with an unbelievable chidush: the gematria of "ויעתר לו ה'" ("and Hashem was persuaded") is the same as the gematria of "חמש שנים" ("five years"). This hints to the idea that the cost of Eisav being born early was the five years that were deducted from Avraham's life!

We have seen that our challenges and struggles can sometimes be given to us in order to help us to daven from a deeper place and thus encourage us to work hard to reach closer to Hashem and closer to our potential. We have also seen that sometimes the answer to our tefillot can be delayed, but for a very good reason. That reason may be hidden from us, but we must trust that Hashem knows best and always acts with our best interests in mind.

Let's try something this week:

1. Remember that Hashem sometimes gives us challenges to help us to work on ourselves and reach our potential. Bearing this in mind can help to buoy our levels of emunah, strengthen our tefillah and prevent us from falling into despair.
2. We can use our minor challenges to spur us on to more intense tefillah. In that way, perhaps we can achieve what needs to be done and thus we may not need as many challenges in the future.
3. Keep in mind that our tefillot may not be answered straight away, but Hashem always has a good reason for this. While we cannot see the full picture we need to trust that Hashem does.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁶ Kiddushin 72b.

⁷ See Breishit 47:8-9 and the Midrash on that exchange.

⁸ In his commentary to Breishit 25:30.