

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Miketz
December 2024 / Kislev 5785

darchai.noam@gmail.com
www.darchai-noam.com

How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Miketz – What on earth was Reuven thinking?!?

In this week's Parsha of Miketz, we read of the dramatic interactions between Yosef (the viceroy of Mitzrayim) and his brothers. The brothers (sans Binyamin) have travelled to Mitzrayim to buy food for the family. The brothers are told that they are not allowed back in the country unless they bring their youngest brother Binyamin with them. This was ostensibly required by the viceroy in order to prove that they are not spies.

But Yaakov does not want to allow Binyamin to go. Binyamin was Yaakov's youngest son. Furthermore, Yaakov presumed that Yosef was dead and therefore that Binyamin was the only son left from his favourite wife Rachel. In addition, Yaakov just found out that his son Shimon was being "held hostage" in Egypt.¹ He didn't want to risk losing Binyamin as well.

The brothers were now at a stalemate. They could not buy more food without bringing Binyamin. But Yaakov would not consent to Binyamin leaving. And the famine was only getting harsher. As the oldest son, Reuven tries to step up to the plate to solve the problem:

And Reuven spoke to his father, saying, "You may put my two sons to death if I don't bring him [Binyamin] to you. Put him into my care and I will return him to you." But he [Yaakov] said, "My son shall not go down with you, because his brother is dead, and he alone is left. If a disaster befalls him on the way you are going, you will bring down my grey head in sorrow to the grave."

(Breishit 42:37-38)

Rashi comments:

He [Yaakov] did not accept Reuven's offer. He said, "This firstborn is a fool. He offers to kill his sons. Are they his sons and not my sons?" (Based on the Midrash Breishit Rabbah 91:9)

This whole offer seems bizarre. Reuven offering that his two sons be killed if he didn't return with Binyamin? He was talking about Yaakov's grandsons! Did he honestly expect Yaakov to agree to this deal?

How can we explain this conversation between Reuven and Yaakov? We can suggest two approaches.

Approach 1: "I'll eat my hat"

Perhaps we can suggest that Reuven didn't literally mean that he would actually kill his sons. Sometimes people use an exaggerated phrase to express an idea in strong terms. For example, there is an old English idiom: "If such and such happens, I'll eat my hat!"² The speaker never intended to eat his hat, he is just trying to express himself in strong terms. Similar phrases include "You can bet your bottom dollar that such and such will happen". Or "pigs might fly". Or "I'll be a monkey's uncle!"³

Similarly, perhaps Reuven was just trying to reassure his father by expressing in very strong and graphic terms that he would take full responsibility for Binyamin. This may be a reasonable attempt to explain Reuven's offer, but it's not entirely satisfactory. According to the Midrash (as quoted by Rashi above), Yaakov at least seems to take Reuven's offer at face value.

Approach 2: The firstborn's double inheritance

The Chatam Sofer was not satisfied with this first explanation. Rather, he invested considerable effort and creative energy into explaining Reuven's words and Yaakov's response. In order to understand the Chatam Sofer's brilliant

¹ Shimon was not abused and made to suffer, languishing in an underground tunnel like our poor hostages. He was only imprisoned while the brothers were in Mitzrayim. As soon as they left, Yosef took Shimon out of prison and made sure he was fed and well looked after (see Rashi to Breishit 42:24).

² In the "olden days", people used to generally wear hats, so this phrase was more meaningful. Perhaps a more modern version could be "I'll eat my phone!"

³ I have no idea where that one comes from!

explanation, we will need to explore a number of topics, including the laws of inheritance and the allocation of the Land of Israel.

The Chatam Sofer starts by explaining that, as the first born son, Reuven was originally entitled to a double portion in the inheritance.⁴ In practice, this would mean that his two oldest sons would each receive a portion in the Land of Israel, just like the other sons of Yaakov, instead of Reuven and his sons receiving only one portion.

The Chatam Sofer then takes us to the Gemara, Baba Batra 118b, which teaches us that Yehoshua and Calev received the portions in Eretz Yisrael that had originally been designated for the meraglim (the spies who brought an evil report about the Land and thus forfeited their portions). The pasuk⁵ describes this event as follows “they lived from among those men”. The Gemara explains that they literally lived in the portions of the spies. We see from here that receiving an inheritance in the Land of Israel is equated with “living”. As a corollary, losing one’s portion is equated with “death” in some way.

The Gemara⁶ lists a number of people that are considered as if they were “dead”, including a blind person and a poor person⁷. Being “alive” means being able to be active in the world and to interact with others and to accomplish. Someone who is blind or poor is somewhat limited in their abilities and thus considered dead on some level. The Chatam Sofer extrapolates from this Gemara that we quoted above, that one who gives up their portion in the Land of Israel is also similar to one who is dead. The Chatam Sofer explains that Reuven was actually offering to forfeit the double inheritance that he was destined to receive (via his sons) in Eretz Yisrael if he didn’t bring Binyamin back safely. The reference to the “death” of his sons was a reference to the loss of their inheritance in the Land, not their physical death. He used strong language in order to convey his seriousness.

However, there was a flaw in Reuven’s offer. For Reuven had previously committed a sin and thus forfeited his firstborn right to a double portion. (We read about Reuven’s sin in Parashat Vayishlach.⁸ On a superficial reading of the pasuk, it seems that Reuven committed a serious sin with Bilhah, Yaakov’s concubine. However, the Gemara⁹ states that Reuven did not sin in this manner. Rather, he interfered with his father’s sleeping arrangements to protect his mother’s honour. He had good intentions, but he acted inappropriately. Because he was such a great person he was judged harshly, and he forfeited his rights as the first born son. The kingship was taken from Reuven and given to Yehuda. The priesthood was taken from Reuven and given to Levi. And the right to a double inheritance was taken from Reuven and given to Yosef.)

We see that when Yaakov formally awarded the double inheritance to Yosef (in Parashat Vayechi), he elevated Yosef’s sons to be equivalent to his own sons. “And now, your two sons... Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine like Reuven and Simeon.”¹⁰ Ephraim and Menashe would each receive a share in the Land of Israel, equivalent to the other sons of Yaakov, and thereby Yosef would essentially have a double portion in the Land.

This background helps us to understand Yaakov’s response to Reuven. Initially, it seemed that Yaakov was asking a rhetorical question: “Are they his sons and not my sons?”. But the Chatam Sofer brilliantly explains that Yaakov was actually making a statement:¹¹ “They are his sons and not my sons!” In other words, Reuven had already lost his right to the double inheritance. Thus, Reuven’s sons remained as Reuven’s sons and were not elevated to the status of Yaakov’s sons (like Ephraim and Menashe subsequently were).¹²

It took some work, but we can now understand this interaction between Yaakov and Reuven on a much deeper level.

Let’s try something this week:

1. Sometimes, on a superficial glance, it appears that someone has spoken to us or acted in a foolish manner. Instead of just dismissing them out of hand, if we really put in the work, and try to get into their shoes, we might understand on a deeper level where they are coming from.
2. Remember that someone who gives up their portion in the Land of Israel is considered dead on some level! If you have the opportunity to live in Israel, and have a stake in some real estate, it is a huge zchut! Appreciate it!

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

* To subscribe please email darchai.noam@gmail.com

⁴ See Devarim 21:17.

⁵ Bamidbar 14:38.

⁶ Nedarim 64b.

⁷ See for example Rashi to Breishit 29:11 (where Eliphaz stole all of Yaakov’s possessions because that was equivalent to killing him) and also Rashi to Breishit 31:42 (which describes Yitzchak as “similar to dead” because he was blind).

⁸ Breishit 35:22.

⁹ Shabbat 55b. The Gemara brings a number of opinions that hold that Reuven did not sin.

¹⁰ Breishit 48:5.

¹¹ The Hebrew words attributed to Yaakov by the Midrash can be read as a question or as a statement.

¹² At this point in our Parasha, Yaakov did not yet know that Yosef was still alive, or that he had two sons. But according to the Chatam Sofer’s explanation Yaakov already knew that Reuven would not be receiving the double inheritance. That privilege was to be given to another son, yet to be determined.