

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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

Vayetze – Misery loves company

The phrase ‘misery loves company’ implies that people who are unhappy or in pain tend to take comfort from the fact that they are not alone in their suffering. They feel comforted when aware that others are also suffering from the same condition or fate. For example, if a parent is trying to drop off a child having a tantrum at kindergarten, if they see another parent struggling with their child, they might feel comforted that they are not the only one. It’s an understandable, yet not ideal character trait. Ideally we all should be caring about our fellow Jew to the point where their pain is our pain. If we learn that they are suffering a similar fate to us we should have Ahavat Yisrael and feel empathy rather than being comforted.

In this week’s Parasha of Vayetze, we read about Yaakov’s experiences in Charan as he marries and establishes his family. We meet Rachel and Leah, two of the Ima’ot. Leah is described as having ‘tender eyes’¹. In his commentary, Rashi explains that her eyes were tender from constant crying, for she thought that she would have to marry the wicked Eisav.

The Gemara² elaborates on this. Rav explains that the description of Leah’s tender eyes is an expression of praise. She would hear travellers at the crossroads coming from the Land of Canaan who would say “Rivka has two sons, and her brother Lavan has two daughters; the older daughter will be married to the older son and the younger daughter will be married to the younger son.” Leah would sit at the crossroads and ask: “What are the deeds of the older son?” The travellers would answer: “He is an evil man, and he robs people”. She would ask: “What are the deeds of the younger son?”. They would answer: “He is a quiet man, dwelling in tents [i.e. learning Torah]”. Leah became so distraught at the prospect of marrying Eisav that she would cry and pray for mercy until her eyelashes fell out.

The Ben Yehoyada³ asks a very insightful question. Leah first inquired about the older son Eisav, the one to whom she thought was destined. But then she asked about the nature of Yaakov. And only then did she start crying, when she heard that Yaakov was a Tzaddik. Why? Was it the fact that her sister Rachel was destined to marry the righteous Yaakov and would not be sharing Leah’s fate? Is that what triggered her tears? If Yaakov had also been wicked, would that have been better?!? Can we even suggest that the righteous Leah would have been comforted if her sister Rachel would share the same fate as her? Surely not.

The Ben Yehoyada also provides a very sharp answer. He says, “It seems to me, b’siyata dishmaya (with the help of Heaven)...” In fact, let’s pause there for a moment. Before we even discuss the Ben Yehoyada’s brilliant answer, let’s focus on the way that he explains it. When the Ben Yehoyada gives a brilliant idea, his trademark is to add in the words ‘b’siyata dishmaya’, thus ascribing his idea to Heavenly help. He doesn’t take the credit for the idea himself, rather he recognises that all of his talents are a Divine gift. That is enough of a mussar lesson to justify this edition of Darchai Noam! We could stop right here and we would have a beautiful message to take with us into the week.

But you probably want to hear the answer to our question about Leah. So we shall continue.

First, a little background. It’s interesting that the Gemara we quoted above describes Leah as sitting at the crossroads and speaking with travellers. Leah was known as one who was comfortable ‘going out’ and interacting with people. We see an example of this after she agreed to give Rachel the dudaim⁴ that her

¹ Breishit 29:17.

² Bava Batra 123a.

³ 1835-1909, Baghdad, also known as the Ben Ish Chai, a leading Sephardi halachic authority and kabbalist.

⁴ Dudaim were a type of plant, perhaps mandrakes or jasmine. Some commentators have suggested that they assisted with fertility. Rachel, who was childless at this point, was very keen to have them.

son Reuven had found. “When Yaakov returned from the field at nightfall Leah *went out* to greet him and said, “You are to come to me tonight, for I have hired you with my son’s mandrakes”.⁵

Dinah, Leah’s daughter, inherited this character trait from her mother. Dinah also liked to go out and interact with others: “Dinah daughter of Leah, whom Leah had borne to Yaakov, *went out* to observe the girls of that region”.⁶ In his commentary on this verse, Rashi notes that Dinah is called the daughter of Leah and not the daughter of Yaakov because she took after her mother in this trait. Rashi explains: “It is because of her going out that she is called the daughter of Leah, for she too had a propensity for going out, as it says [in the pasuk we quoted above]: ‘Leah went out to greet him’.”

Like all character traits, this trait of ‘going out’ can be used in both a positive and a negative way. Leah and Dinah had strength of character and self-confidence. They had a strong personality and were comfortable dealing with others. They were able to influence without being influenced. They would have been excellent at kiruv!

In fact, we learn that Dinah was considered to have been able to transform Eisav from wicked to good. We see this when Yaakov crossed the river on his way to meet Eisav. The pasuk notes that he took his two wives, two handmaidens and eleven sons⁷. Rashi notices that Dinah was not mentioned, and he quotes a remarkable Midrash: “And where was Dinah? He [Yaakov] had put her in a crate and locked her in so that Esav not cast his eyes upon her to marry her. And therefore Yaakov was punished for keeping her away from his brother, as she might have brought him back to the right path, so she fell into the hands of Shechem.”⁸

Just as Leah was originally destined to marry Eisav, it seems that Dinah was an appropriate replacement to step into her mother’s shoes and marry Eisav instead. Perhaps this is because both Leah and Dinah had the right nature to potentially influence Eisav and bring him back to the straight and narrow.

Now we can return to the Ben Yehayada’s answer to his question. When Leah found out that Eisav was wicked, why did she go on to ask about Yaakov? And why did she only start crying when she heard that Yaakov was righteous? The Ben Yehoyada explains that even though Eisav was wicked, Leah at first thought that she had it what it took to influence Esav for the good. She knew her abilities and she was confident that she had the strength of character to influence Eisav without being influenced. But when she heard that Yaakov was a Tzaddik she understood that Eisav was not redeemable. His own twin brother, with whom he grew up, was not able to influence him. He was surrounded by great Tzaddikim – Eisav’s father was Yitzchak, the perfect offering, a worthy inheritor of his great father. His mother was Rivkah, who grew up in a house of wicked people but managed to become a great Tzadeket. And even his brother was extremely righteous. At this point Leah realised that she would not be able to successfully influence Eisav. That’s why she started crying. She came to the same realisation as Rivkah, who also understood that Eisav was not redeemable. That is why Rivkah didn’t want Yitzchak to give Eisav the brachot.

Leah was very much in touch with her strengths, but also her limits. She would have risen to the challenge of transforming Eisav, but only if he was transformable.

Let’s try something this week:

1. Try to be aware of your character and your strengths and weaknesses. We all have something to contribute to the Jewish People and to the world. What can you contribute?
2. Doing kiruv is a very admirable and important job. But we must be careful to avoid exposing ourselves to influences that may be too dangerous for our own spiritual position.
3. Try to identify when you experience the very human tendency to crow over another’s shared misfortune. Admit it to yourself, ask Hashem for help and then try hard to replace the feeling with genuine empathy. Just as we would surely not celebrate if our spouse or child suffered the same nisayon that we are facing, so too we should feel the same towards all fellow Jews.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁵ Breishit 30:16.

⁶ Breishit 34:1.

⁷ Breishit 32:23.

⁸ This is a difficult Midrash to understand. See Darchai Noam Vayishlach 5774 (2013) where we discussed this further.