

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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

Vayigash – Smile and become happy!

In this week's Parasha of Vayigash, Yaakov is finally reunited with his beloved son Yosef. After an emotional reunion, Yosef introduces his elderly father to his boss, Pharaoh. This is no ordinary meeting. Pharaoh is the leader of the world superpower. Yaakov is the father of the Jewish people. What would we expect the primary topic of discussion to be?

When David Ben Gurion met with Albert Einstein in 1951, they discussed such weighty issues as the existence of G-d, freedom, relativity and philosophy. The subject matter of the conversation between Pharaoh and Yaakov seems comparatively mundane (Breishit 47:8-9):

Pharaoh said to Yaakov: "How many are the days of the years of your life?"

And Yaakov said to Pharaoh: "The days of the years of my sojournings are one hundred and thirty years. The days of the years of my life have been few and bad, and they have not reached the days of the years of the lives of my forefathers in the days of their sojournings."

Pharaoh asks Yaakov how old he is and Yaakov whinges about how miserable his life has been.

According to the Midrash, the Avot were all supposed to live until 180 years. Only Yitzchak made it. Avraham died at the age of 175. Hashem shortened his life by 5 years so that he should not suffer the anguish of seeing his grandson Eisav start to live an evil life.¹ Yaakov only lived until the age of 147. The Midrash explains that Yaakov lost 33 years as a punishment for the 33 words that were used to complain to Pharaoh about his life.

This Midrash needs to be explained². Yaakov's response to Pharaoh consists of only 25 words! To get to 33 words we need to add Pharaoh's question, including the words "Pharaoh said to Yaakov". We can perhaps understand why someone of Yaakov's stature would be punished for describing his life in negative terms. But why should Yaakov be punished for Pharaoh's question?

In his commentary on the Torah, the Ramban notes that it is unusual for two world leaders to engage in such a mundane conversation. The Ramban explains that Yaakov looked extremely old and worn. Therefore, Pharaoh dispensed with the usual diplomatic protocol to inquire after Yaakov's age. Yaakov then explained to Pharaoh why he appeared much older than his actual age.

Had Yaakov weathered his suffering with a more cheerful disposition, he would not have appeared to Pharaoh to be so remarkably old. In that case, Pharaoh would not have been prompted to ask his question, and Yaakov would not have needed to respond negatively.

But is it fair to blame Yaakov? The 17 years that he was about to spend in Mitzrayim was going to be the best time of his life. However, until this point in his life Yaakov has been suffering one challenge after another:

- Being forced to deceive his father in order to obtain the brachot.
- Running from his brother who had vowed to kill him.

¹ Rashi on Breishit 25:30.

² This explanation comes from Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz (1902-1979), the Rosh Yeshiva of the Mirrer Yeshiva.

- Being robbed and left penniless by his nephew.
- Being tricked into marrying a different woman.
- Working for many years for his corrupt father-in-law who constantly changed the terms of engagement.
- Having to face his brother accompanied with 400 soldiers.
- Enduring the kidnap and rape of his daughter.
- Being separated from his mother for more than 30 years and then not having a chance to see her before her death.
- Enduring the separation and presumed death of his beloved son Yosef for more than 20 years.

However, despite these objectively valid reasons for looking old and worn out, Yaakov was still punished for his appearance and his complaint. Yaakov had reached such a high level of righteousness that he was judged on a totally different level than we are. If we were to suffer even a fraction of what Yaakov suffered, we would surely be forgiven for appearing worn and depressed. But what can we learn from this story?

We can learn the importance of putting on a happy face and smiling. In Pirkei Avot³, Shammai teaches us that we should greet everyone with a cheerful face. This doesn't mean that we should walk around with a fake smile constantly plastered on our face or that we should ignore genuine issues and problems in our lives. It is often appropriate and even healthy to be sad and to express that feeling at the time. But, we do risk getting caught in a rut and allowing ourselves to wallow in a negative frame of mind for longer than necessary. According to Dennis Prager in "Happiness is a Serious Problem", self-pity is often addictive and more tempting to indulge in than happiness. We can get so enmeshed in our own problems that we walk down the street with a perpetually miserable face.

It seems that the Torah is teaching us to actively create a happy exterior. In certain cases, this can be hard work. However, there are psychological studies which support the idea that the act of smiling can actually boost our happiness, even though the smile is not initially a genuine smile.

For inspiration to help us be cheerful, we should remind ourselves that we are blessed with life! We often take this for granted, but life is an amazing gift from Hashem. It is the opportunity for us to earn our eternal reward in the World to Come. And every, single thing we have in this life of ours is also a precious gift that we can focus on and marvel over with enthusiasm.

As well as the benefit we receive ourselves, smiling also provides a benefit to the people that we interact with. When we greet other people with a smile, we can cheer them up and turn their whole day around. Just because we may feel sad inside, this doesn't mean that we should rob the other person of the gift of a smile.

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to notice our feelings and recognise when we are feeling a bit down.
2. Actively accept that our life is exactly how Hashem wants it to be at this moment.
3. Deliberately adopt a happy face and greet other people with a smile, whether or not we truly feel it.
4. Redirect our thoughts and feelings by adopting a 'gratitude attitude' and focusing on every little thing that has gone right, and everything we have been gifted with up until this point in our life.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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³ Chapter 1, Mishnah 15.