

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Vaera
January 2026 / Tevet 5786

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

How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Vaera – Be as bold as a leopard

In this week's Parasha of Vaera, Hashem sends Moshe and Aaron to confront Pharaoh and demand that he release Bnei Yisrael. Hashem tells Moshe and Aaron that if Pharaoh asks for a sign to prove that Hashem sent them, Aaron should throw his staff to the ground and it will turn into a snake.¹

Aaron did as instructed. He threw his staff to the ground and it turned into a snake. Pharaoh was not impressed. He commanded his magicians to perform the same trick.² The Midrash tells us that Pharaoh also called his wife and she was also able to transform a stick into a snake. Pharaoh then called some young school kids and they also repeated the feat. Pharaoh then ridiculed Moshe and Aaron and asks them why they had bothered coming with simple tricks to Egypt, the home of magic. It was like trying to sell ice to the Eskimos!

Moshe and Aaron probably knew that this trick was not going to impress Pharaoh. Yet since they were commanded by Hashem to perform it, they followed boldly exactly what Hashem had told them to do. In Pirkai Avot³ Yehuda Ben Tema teaches: “Be bold as a leopard...to carry out the will of your Father in Heaven”. Commentators⁴ explain that this means we should not be embarrassed to carry out Hashem's will, even among people who scorn and laugh at us. This is brought as Halacha by the Rama in the very first chapter of the Shulchan Aruch⁵.

We can achieve this courage by working on our fear of Heaven and by demonstrating through our choices and actions that we are proud to be Jewish. Pride, or *Gaiva*, is usually considered a negative character trait. However, every character trait has an appropriate expression. The character trait of *gaiva* is endorsed when we feel proud of our Jewishness so that we fearlessly carry out Hashem's will.

The Maharam mi Rotenburg epitomised this character trait of taking pride in his Jewishness. He was one of the leaders of Ashkenazi Jewry in the 13th Century and he received countless halachik questions. At this point in history, there was terrible persecution of the Jews. Many harsh decrees were made by the Christians in Europe. Jews were required to wear distinctive clothing so that they could be identified as Jewish. Some people asked the Maharam how the Jewish community should respond to these decrees. They presumed that the Maharam would encourage the Jewish community to fight against the decrees, to refuse to comply, to appeal for the decrees to be abolished or perhaps to bribe the king. Instead, the Maharam turned an item of disgrace into an item of pride. For instance, in relation to the requirement to wear a distinctive

¹ Shmot 7:8-9

² Shmot 7:10-11

³ Pirkai Avot 5:23

⁴ See the Tur (Orach Chaim 1) and the Rambam's commentary on the Mishnah

⁵ Orach Chaim 1:1

badge, the Maharam advised that the badge be sewed on extra well so that there be no question of carrying when the wearer walked outside on Shabbat. When asked about the distinctive hat the Jews had to wear, the Maharam replied that if only the hat was more comfortable, he would even wear it to bed!⁶ In effect, he was sending the message that Jews *are* different from the other nations, and that we should be proud of our difference and celebrate it.

It takes a person with strong principles to uphold their Jewish pride under challenging circumstances. The Maharam mi Rotenberg was certainly a man of principles. He was kidnapped and held to ransom by the Emperor of Germany. The Jewish community raised the enormous sum that was demanded for his release, but the Maharam refused to allow the community to pay the ransom. He understood that if this precedent was set, every noted Rabbi would be at risk of being kidnapped. The Maharam selflessly preferred to stay in prison in order to protect others from his own fate. He stayed in prison for seven years until his death. His body was then held for ransom, but the Maharam had left a will forbidding his body from being redeemed. According to Jewish legend, his body lay in the prison for seven years and did not decompose! Eventually, the Emperor's successor accepted a small amount to release the Maharam's body and allow it to be buried appropriately.

A story about the Ba'al Shem Tov reveals another example of the importance of Jewish pride. The Ba'al Shem Tov was informed that a man named Reb Baruch was destined to be his study partner in the World to Come⁷. He was curious to meet Reb Baruch, so he travelled to the distant village where Reb Baruch lived. He was very disappointed when he discovered that Reb Baruch seemed to be very greedy, constantly eating and drinking. After watching him for a while, the Ba'al Shem Tov struck up a conversation. Reb Baruch explained to the Ba'al Shem Tov why he consumed so much. His father was killed as a Kiddush Hashem – he was caught during a pogrom and burned alive. However, his father was a very skinny man, so the fire was very small. Reb Baruch decided that if he was caught and burned alive, he wanted the fire to be large, thereby enabling him to sanctify Hashem's name in a greater and more impressive way. The Ba'al Shem Tov then realised that Reb Baruch had an enormous sense of Jewish pride, and that he would indeed be a worthy partner in the World to Come.

Let's try something this week:

1. Recognise when we feel inhibited from performing a mitzva due to embarrassment and concern about what other people might think. This sense of shame may be in relation to our non-Jewish neighbours, or even from fellow Jews who are less observant.
2. Try not to hold back from performing mitzvot or appearing "too Jewish" in front of others.
3. To boost our Jewish pride, let's remind ourselves that we are Hashem's chosen people! We have an important mission to perform in this world – to be partners with Hashem and to demonstrate the right way to live. We are the "light unto the nations" and the "sons and daughters of the King"!

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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

⁶ Heard from Rabbi Berel Wein in his series of Jewish history lectures "Travels through Jewish History".

⁷ There are many legends told about who will be the Ba'al Shem Tov's partner in the World to Come. They can't all be true but they all could be true. It doesn't really matter if a legend is true or not. The fact that such a legend exists characterises the person and teaches us other lessons.