

MESHECH CHOCHMAH

Parshas Noach

Pru U'rvu and the Principle of Darchei Noam

פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ

Be fruitful and multiply (9:7)

The Gemara¹ states that the mitzvah of *pru u'rvu* (procreation) does not apply to women. Although the Gemara does not provide a reason for this exemption, the Meshech Chochmah explains that it is based on a principle which runs throughout the Torah and which expresses itself in many different ways. This principle is formulated by **Shlomo HaMelech** in *Mishlei*,² where he says, “וְכָל דְרָכֶיהָ דָרְכֵי נְעִים וְכָל נְתִיבוֹתֶיהָ שְׁלוֹם” – *Its ways are ways of pleasantness, and all its pathways are peace.*”

The Torah and Human Nature

One of the primary areas where we see the idea of “*darchei noam*” in the Torah is in the way the mitzvos relate to human nature. Although the Torah demands that we control and develop our nature, it does not place demands on us which will be irreconcilable with our nature. Thus, for example:

- ▷ The Torah only requires us to fast one day a year, and moreover obligates us to eat and drink on the day beforehand.

¹ *Yevamos* 65b.

² 3:17.

- ▷ The Gemara³ states that for everything that the Torah prohibited, it permitted a corresponding entity. For example, it forbade us to consume blood, but permitted us to eat liver, which has the taste of blood. It forbade us to consume the fat of a *beheima* (domesticated animals), but permitted us to consume the fat of a *chaya* (undomesticated animal).
- ▷ The Torah does not require or advocate celibacy. The one historical exception was Moshe Rabbeinu, whose elevated nature meant that such drives had ceased to exist within him and hence this was not a form of deprivation.
- ▷ The Torah famously permits the *yefas toar*, a woman one comes across during battle.⁴ In this case, since the Torah gauges that he may be unable to withstand temptation on account of the heat of battle and the accompanying heightening of emotions and passions, it does not forbid him to have a relationship with her.⁵

It is for this same reason, Meshech Chochmah suggests, the Torah did not obligate women in the mitzvah of *pru u'rvu*. Since childbirth involves a potential danger to life, the Torah did not require a woman to put herself in that situation. On the other hand, for purposes of propagating humankind, Hashem endowed a woman with a very powerful drive to have children, which results in her choosing to undergo the experience of childbirth; however, He did not obligate her to do so.

Darchei Noam as a Factor in Halachah

Indeed, we find the concept of *darchei noam* express itself as a factor in determining otherwise unstated halachos. The Gemara⁶ states that the mitzvah of *yibbum* applies only to a woman who is childless at the time her husband dies. If her child should die at a later stage she does not retroactively become subject to the mitzvah of *yibbum*. The reason for this, says the Gemara, is that it is a contravention of the idea of *darchei noam*, for if she has since re-married, it will be extremely unpleasant for her to subsequently fall into a relationship with her deceased first husband's brother. This halacha is not stated either explicitly or implicitly in the parsha of *yibbum* itself. Its sole basis, with all the accompanying ramifications, is the principle of "*darchei noam*."⁷

If "*darchei noam*" can impact on the halachah where it was otherwise unstated in any capacity, it can certainly help us understand the halachah as derived by Chazal, in this instance, the exemption of women from the mitzvah of *pru u'rvu*.

3 *Chullin* 109b.

4 See *Devarim* 21:10-14.

5 *Kiddushin* 21b.

6 *Yevamos* 87b.

7 The Meshech Chochmah presents this halachah as one that was derived by "*Avos HaKabbalah*" – those who received the Torah tradition. He refers them as such because it is only through being part of the chain of Torah transmission that they can gauge when and how to apply the principle of *darchei noam* (R' Yehuda Copperman, commentary to the Meshech Chochmah).

Hashem's Words to Adam, Yaakov – and Noach.

Moreover, this idea can help us answer a question which seemingly remains unresolved in the Gemara's discussion. Upon stating that women are exempt from *pru u'rvu*, the Gemara immediately points out that Hashem's words when originally commanding this mitzvah were stated in the plural – “פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ” – for He was addressing both Adam and Chava. How, then, can we say that women are exempt? To this question, Rav Yosef (*Yevamos* ibid.) responds by pointing out that subsequently Hashem told Yaakov “פְּרָה וּרְבָה” in the singular, thereby indicating that only he was obligated in the mitzvah.⁸ The problem is, Rav Yosef doesn't seem to address the Gemara's question that this mitzvah was originally phrased in the plural to Adam and Chava! How can this apparent contradiction be resolved?

The answer, says Meshech Chochmah, is that when the mitzvah of *pru u'rvu* was originally given, it involved Chava as well, for this was prior to the sin of the *Etz HaDa'as*, when childbirth involved neither pain nor danger. As such, at that time, there was no reason for Chava not to be obligated equally in the mitzvah! Subsequent to the sin of the *Etz HaDa'as* however, when pain and danger are part of the process, women are no longer obligated, as expressed in the *pasuk* where Hashem addressed Yaakov.

A follow-up question, however, may be raised from our *pasuk*, where the mitzvah is also stated in the plural, even though Noach lived after the sin of the *Etz Hada'as*! Interestingly, the Gemara does not mention this question.⁹ The Meshech Chochmah explains that our *pasuk* may be understood when considering its context. *Pasuk* 1 of this *perek* opens by saying “God blessed Noach and his sons.” Hence, the reason the words “*pru u'rvu*” are phrased in the plural is because they were addressed to Noach and his sons, all of whom were male and all of whom were obligated in that Mitzvah.

The Flow of Talmudic Statements

With a beautiful masterstroke, the Meshech Chochmah concludes this discussion by adducing support for his approach from the words of the Gemara itself. The statement exempting women from the mitzvah of *pru u'rvu* is presented in the Gemara by R' Ila'a in the name of R' Elazar ben Shimon. The Gemara then proceeds to quote two additional statements from R' Elazar ben Shimon:

In the same way it is a mitzvah to say something that will be heeded, so too it is a mitzvah not to say something which will not be heeded, as it says “do not rebuke a scoffer lest he hate you, rebuke a wise person and he will love you”.

*It is permissible for a person to alter the truth for the sake of maintaining peace.*¹⁰

On the face of it, these three statements do not seem to be at all connected. And indeed, it

8 See Gemara *Yevamos* ibid. for an additional response to this question.

9 This question is raised by the Maharasha (*Yevamos* ibid.) who concludes by saying “ויש ליישב – it is possible to resolve it.” The Meshech Chochmah understands that the answer he proceeds to give is the one intended by the Maharsha.

10 See the Gemara there where various sources and additional opinions are brought regarding this matter.

is commonly accepted that that Gemara will on occasion bring a number of statements from the same Tanna or Amora simply because of the way they were presented, even if they are not connected. In this instance, all three statements of R' Elazar ben Shimon were presented by the same Amora – R' Ila'a. However, the Meshech Chochmah explains that all three statements are connected, for they all express how the Torah does not require a person to place themselves in a situation which will lead to undue tension, strife or difficulty. This is what is behind the mitzvah to refrain from rebuking one who will merely react by scoffing, for it will achieve no purpose other than engendering bad feeling. Similarly, permission is granted to alter the truth if being truthful will lead to strife and unpleasantness. As we have seen, this is also the concern behind the first statement which exempts women from *pru u'rvu*, for to obligate them to place themselves in a situation of danger would likewise contravene a fundamental principle in Torah, whose ways are ways of pleasantness and whose pathways are peace.