

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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

Balak – The art of listening

In this week's Parasha of Balak, we read about the famous story of Bilaam and his unsuccessful attempts to curse Bnei Yisrael. Ultimately, Hashem literally puts words into Bilaam's mouth, forcing him to recite beautiful words of praise about Bnei Yisrael.

Hashem communicates with Bilaam on a number of occasions in this story. During the course of Hashem's interactions with Bilaam (both directly and through an angel), Hashem appears to change His mind a number of times. At the beginning of the Parasha, Balak the king of Moab sends a delegation to Bilaam to ask for his assistance in dealing with the 'Jewish problem'. Hashem appears to Bilaam at night and tells him not to go. Balak continues to send higher ranking officers, offering Bilaam more and more remuneration. However, Hashem's response is the same. Eventually, Hashem apparently changes His mind and agrees to allow Bilaam to go, but He instructs Bilaam that he is only allowed to bless the Jewish people. But then Hashem seems to change His mind again and He becomes angry at the fact that Bilaam is going,¹ and He sends an angel three times to stop Bilaam. The angel eventually allows Bilaam to continue on the journey, but only after reminding him that he is only permitted to say what Hashem instructs him to say, that is, words of blessing and not words of curse.

So does Hashem want Bilaam to go or not? Hashem is perfect and unchanging. Vacillation and indecisiveness are not Divine characteristics. How can we make sense of Hashem's interactions with Bilaam?

Perhaps we can explain this incident through the means of a parable²:

Reuven was a teenager who just got his driving licence. He asked his father Shimon if he could borrow the car. Shimon understood that teenagers can be somewhat less than mature at times, so he refused the request. After repeated requests and offers to do chores around the house, Shimon finally agreed, but only with certain conditions: absolutely no alcohol, all passengers must wear seat belts and Reuven must be home by 11:00pm at the latest. Reuven jumped for joy and ran off to call his friends with the good news. Shimon was concerned that Reuven heard the "yes" but didn't hear the "but". So when it came time to go, Shimon took the keys and placed them safely in his own pocket. When Reuven protested, his father told him to sit down, calm down and listen very carefully to the conditions. When Shimon was sure that Reuven understood the importance of the conditions, he finally handed over the keys.

It seems that Hashem was always prepared to allow Bilaam to go, but only if he agreed to the condition that he could only bless Bnei Yisrael. Hashem could see into Bilaam's heart and He knew how eager Bilaam was to curse Bnei Yisrael. So Hashem was making sure that Bilaam was listening carefully and internalising the fundamental condition upon which he could go on the journey.

¹ Bamidbar 22:22.

² Based on an idea that I heard from Rabbi Jonathan Snowbell from Yeshivat Har Etzion.

We can learn from this interaction the importance of listening properly and attentively when others are speaking to us. Listening is a very important, but difficult, skill to master. People generally want to feel heard. The mere fact that someone is really listening can help them feel validated, unburdened and accepted. Listening to someone can be a great act of kindness. In addition, the simple act of really listening can help to calm someone's anger and defuse a potentially volatile situation. In contrast, feeling that one is not being heard is frustrating and can cause resentment.

Listening without judgement is an example of the middah of 'hod' or submission. Listening allows us to really understand the other person's perspective.

Here are some tips to help us to improve our listening skills:

- Maintain eye contact.
- Use some 'encouragers' – sounds and gestures that indicate that you are paying attention.
- Summarise and repeat back to the speaker what they have said to demonstrate that you heard them, and you understand them.
- If anything is unclear, ask for clarification.
- Try to avoid thinking about your own response while the other person is talking.

The main facet of listening is to focus on the other person, rather than ourselves. Our job is to use our ears and to give the other person an empathetic reception.

The following story is told about the great Rebbi (R' Yehuda HaNasi, the redactor of the Mishnah):³

One day there was a calf that was on its way to being slaughtered. The calf escaped and ran weeping to Rebbi. Rebbi instructed the calf to go back to the slaughterhouse because that was the reason for which it was created. As a result of this incident Rebbi was punished with 13 years of physical suffering. The pain only stopped when Rebbi had mercy on some weasels in his house and instructed his maidservant not to hit them with a broom.

What did Rebbi do wrong? He was only telling the calf the truth. However, perhaps on his high level, Rebbi was expected to have more empathy when listening to the calf. Though R' Yehuda HaNasi heard the calf's complaint, we can suggest that on his level, he didn't pay sufficient attention to the calf's feelings and empathise with it. He didn't feel its pain. Thus, he was punished for this.

We are coming up to the Three Weeks. This is the appropriate time to remember that the second Bet Hamikdash was destroyed due to baseless hatred. And since it has not yet been rebuilt, that means that this sin is still being perpetuated. The remedy for this sin is to increase our love for each other. One way we can do this is to learn from the story of Bilsam to listen attentively when people speak to us, and not just hear what we want to hear. And to learn from the story of Rebbi Yehuda HaNasi to listen with empathy and care about the other person's feelings.

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to improve our listening skills by practising some of the tips mentioned above.
2. When listening to another, remind ourselves that this is the time to be receptive and empathetic.
3. When we are listening, remember: it's not about us... it's about the other person!

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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³ Gemara, Baba Metzia 85a.