

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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

Devarim – Other people’s money

This Shabbat we start reading Sefer Devarim, the final book of the Torah. That means that Elul is just around the corner, and Rosh Hashanah is not far behind. It is time to start considering our teshuva process. In addition, this Shabbat is erev Tisha B’Av. This is the culmination of the “Three Weeks” during which we should be focusing on improving our interpersonal relationships. Since baseless hatred led to the destruction of the Bet Hamikdash and the Bet Hamikdash has not yet been rebuilt, we have not yet overcome this negative trait. We can strive to improve this by treating others with unconditional love. Overall, this is a very opportune time for us to work on our middot. In that light, a lesson from this week’s Parsha may help us improve.

In our Parsha, Moshe recounts to Bnei Yisrael how Hashem informed them that the years of wandering in the desert were finally coming to an end:

“Hashem said to me, saying “You have circled this mountain long enough; turn northward”
(Sefer Devarim, Parshat Devarim 2:3)

Hashem then instructed Bnei Yisrael as to how they should act on their way towards Eretz Yisrael.

*“You are about to pass through the boundary of your brothers, the children of Eisav, who dwell in Seir, and they will be afraid of you. But be very careful. You shall not provoke them, for I will not give you any of their land, **not so much as a footstep**, because I have given Mount Seir to Eisav for an inheritance.”* (Sefer Devarim, Parshat Devarim 2:4-5)

Even though Eisav is described as Bnei Yisrael’s ‘brother’, the two nations were far from friendly and the nation of Edom (the name given to Eisav’s descendants) were wicked. Nevertheless, Hashem instructed Bnei Yisrael to avoid taking even an inch of Eisav’s land. That land belonged to Eisav and was forbidden to Bnei Yisrael.

We can learn a broader lesson from this instruction, not to take anything that belongs to others. But how do we know what belongs to others and what rightfully belongs to us? The answer is – by following the halacha.

In Iggeret HaMussar, Rav Yisrael Salanter emphasised the need to be as careful with the prohibitions regarding stealing as with other mitzvot. He pointed out how people are very careful about the laws of kashrut yet not as exacting regarding monetary matters. He notes that the consequences of stealing are also severe, just as are the consequences of breaching kashrut. The story is told of a shochet who came to Rav Salanter with the desire to quit his job and open a shop instead. The halachot relating to shechitah are very complex and he was afraid of the responsibility. He was concerned that any mistake could cause others to eat non-kosher meat. Rav Yisrael pointed out that while shechitah only involved one prohibition, running a business would necessitate interacting with people on a financial basis, whereby many prohibitions could potentially be transgressed!¹

¹ Sparks of Mussar, R’ Chaim Zaitchik. Quoted by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen in his article “The Seriousness of Stealing”.

The laws relating to finances are very pertinent to everyday life, however they are often lesser studied and lesser known. Those learning for Rabbanut smicha usually focus on the “big three” topics - Kashrut, Shabbat and the laws of family purity. They may also learn other areas such as the laws of prayer, marriage, mourning and brachot. This involves a number of years learning complex and intricate laws. Only once one has semicha as a Rabbi, does one then begin to learn the hardest and longest course of study – Dayanut. This focuses on the laws set out in Choshen Mishpat² – concerning finance, business, money, loans, charging interest and damages. These are some of the most complex issues in halacha and they are issues that we often encounter every day.

There was a group of Jewish businessmen who wanted to spend their lunchtimes learning Torah. They were considering which topic might be suitable. One suggested learning Gemara, another suggested a shiur on the Weekly Parsha and another wanted to learn the laws of prayer. They asked a Rav for advice. He suggested that they learn the laws of business. It would be most useful for these businessmen to learn the halachot that related to their daily activities. They agreed. After learning these halachot for a while, they testified that their learning changed the way they did business. They discovered that many areas of their business practice had actually breached the halacha. Until they started learning the laws in detail they had no idea that they were committing such sins.

Some people believe that Halacha belongs in the shule and the home, but that business is different. Their attitude is: ‘this is how things are done in business’ and ‘everyone else acts this way’. Other people may make a genuine effort to be fair in business. They are generous, forgiving and very fair in their business dealings. However, without a proper grounding in the halacha, even this group may be trampling on the mitzvot relating to money. Even with the best of intentions, they might be inadvertently stealing.

We need to be extremely careful with other people’s money and property. These issues come up every day – not just in the workplace but in day-to-day life. Areas to watch out for include:

- Paying employees on time (including babysitters)
- Paying or charging late fees (which may be prohibited interest)
- Overcharging or underpaying
- Bearing responsibility if we cause damage to someone else’s property.

Whenever we confront any financial matter, large or small, its best is to ask an expert Rav who is competent in these laws. Bnei Yisrael were forbidden from taking any land that was designated to Eisav, even so much as a footstep. We are similarly forbidden to take any money or property that does not belong to us, even so much as a hairsbreadth.

Let’s try something this week:

1. Focus on being careful with others’ money and property. Try to be sensitive to any issues that might arise
2. If in doubt about any financial or property issues, ask a Rav.
3. Be aware of the seemingly “little” issues such as borrowing a small item without permission, failing to give accurate ma’aser (tzedakah), or causing minor damage to someone’s property.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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² The fourth section of the Shulchan Aruch.