

# DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

## “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Korach  
June 2025 / Tamuz 5785

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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

### Korach – Softly and calmly<sup>1</sup>

In this week's Parasha we read about the rebellion lead by Korach, the cousin of Moshe and Aaron. Korach gathered together a group, including very prestigious people and leaders of the tribes, as well as the wicked Datan and Aviram. They attempt to overthrow Moshe and Aaron as the leaders of Bnei Yisrael. Korach's group are angry about a number of things, including the fact that Moshe appointed his brother Aaron as the Kohen Gadol, in an apparent act of nepotism.

Moshe asked Hashem for an open miracle to make it clear beyond a shadow of doubt that he and Aaron were appointed by Hashem and are the legitimate leaders of Bnei Yisrael. Hashem agreed and He caused the earth to literally open up underneath the rebels and swallow them alive, together with their households and possessions. Miraculously, only Korach and his followers were swallowed up by the earth. A natural earthquake could never have had such a targeted effect. This was clearly an open miracle.

After such a dramatic demonstration by Hashem, we would have thought that Bnei Yisrael would receive the message loud and clear. The complaints should have stopped and the people should have submitted absolutely to Moshe's leadership. Yet, remarkably, the complaints did not stop! The next day, Bnei Yisrael gathered against Moshe and Aaron and complained that they had acted inappropriately in killing the rebels:

*The following day, the entire congregation of Israel complained against Moses and Aaron saying, "You have killed the people of Hashem."<sup>2</sup>*

In response, Hashem commanded Moshe to give Bnei Yisrael another proof of Aaron's greatness and legitimacy. Each tribe inscribed their name on a staff and gave it to Moshe. The tribe of Levi were instructed to inscribe Aaron's name on its staff. Moshe placed all the staffs together in the Mishkan. He then informed Bnei Yisrael that only the staff belonging to the tribe whose leader was chosen by Hashem would blossom. The next morning, they inspected the staffs and found that only Aaron's staff had blossomed with ripe almonds. The other staffs remained unchanged. After witnessing this miracle, Bnei Yisrael finally internalised the message that Aaron had been chosen by Hashem to be the Kohen Gadol. The complaints ceased.<sup>3</sup>

Why did Bnei Yisrael need the quiet, more down-to-earth, miracle of the blossoming almonds in order to become fully convinced? Why didn't they accept this message after the loud and impressive miracle of the earth swallowing the rebels? Perhaps we can learn from here that often the best way to really impact people is to talk calmly and rationally.

<sup>1</sup> This week's Darchai Noam is inspired by a D'var Torah that I heard from Rabbi Garfunkel on Parshat Korach a number of years ago in Melbourne.

<sup>2</sup> Bamidbar 17:6.

<sup>3</sup> Actually, after the miracle of the blossoming staff, Bnei Yisrael did complain again. They complained that it was too difficult to live so close to the Mishkan because too many of them were dying. However, this was a legitimate concern, borne by experience and was not a complaint about the leadership. Hashem responded to Bnei Yisrael's concern by appointing the Kohanim and the Leviim to guard the Mishkan and to make sure that Bnei Yisrael didn't come too close to it.

Certainly, there are times when we need to give a strong and clear message. Korach and the rebels had to be dealt with swiftly and decisively. There are times when this is unavoidable, and we cannot shy away from delivering a strong message when that is what is needed. (For instance, the only language that some of Israel's enemies understand is power and force!<sup>4</sup>)

However, using force is a necessary evil and is not an ideal way to convince others. People generally respond better when we speak softly and appeal to their better judgement. It is difficult to imagine Korach and the wicked Datan and Aviram being convinced by the miracle of the blossoming almonds. But for the majority of Bnei Yisrael, that is the channel of communication that worked most effectively.

There is a famous psychology study<sup>5</sup> where a child is placed into a room with an adult authority figure and a treat. In the first group, the adult warns the child that they must not eat the treat and that they will be punished if they do. In the second group, the adult tells the child that it is wrong to eat the treat and that they trust the child to do the right thing. The adult then leaves the room and the child is left alone with the treat. The researchers found that more children succumbed to the temptation of eating the treat in the first group, when they were threatened with punishment. Appealing to the child's sense of what is right in a calm manner was usually the more successful approach.

In business, the managers who are more successful tend to minimise direct commands to their team. They often ask their subordinates for their input and their thoughts. In that way, the people feel ownership of the decision and are more likely to comply. The good manager will gently and indirectly guide the team to the correct outcome and will only impose their will when absolutely necessary. One of the best managers that I worked with was very good at this technique. Whenever a problem would arise, he would ask even relatively junior employees, "What do you think we should do?" It was very empowering. Of course, he was always ready to give advice or to step in and take over if needed.

Sir Isaac Newton's third law of physics states that every action has an equal and opposite reaction. This principle applies in life. If you push someone, they will instinctively resist and try to push back. Otherwise, they will lose their balance and fall over! Speaking loudly and imposing our will can be equated with pushing against someone. The natural human response is to resist. In contrast, speaking calmly and softly does not evoke this negative response. Instead of pushing against someone, invite them to join with you to push something else and thus work together to achieve a united outcome.

The Ramban wrote a letter to his oldest son, Nachman, with instructions to read the letter weekly. The letter contains brilliant advice on how to live one's life in an appropriate way. The first piece of advice that the Ramban offers his son is to adopt the habit of speaking calmly to everyone.

Certainly, there is a time to show force and to convey our message loudly and clearly.<sup>6</sup> But our default position should be to speak calmly and softly, particularly with those who are rational and with whom we want to maintain a positive relationship.

Let's try something this week:

1. When we feel tempted to use force or anger to convince someone, remember the lesson from our Parasha – Bnei Yisrael only accepted the message when it was presented in a quiet, calm manner.
2. Instead of *instructing* someone what to do, try asking them for their input.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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<sup>4</sup> No sane person would suggest that calm and rational diplomacy would be an effective strategy for dealing with Iran!

<sup>5</sup> I could not find the exact source for this experiment. The details of the actual experiment may differ from the way that I have described it here. However, the principle is the same.

<sup>6</sup> Like the message that the IDF sent to Iran!