

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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

How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Mishpatim – The ox and the sheep

This week's Parsha of Mishpatim lists a large number of mitzvot. Let's focus on one of those mitzvot and explore lessons we can learn that are relevant to us.

The Torah teaches us that a thief has to repay what he stole and in some circumstances he has to pay back double. If a thief stole an ox or a sheep and slaughtered or sold it, it is no longer able to be returned. In such a case, the Torah imposes an additional penalty.

“If a man steals an ox or a sheep and slaughters it or sells it, he shall pay five cattle for the ox or four sheep for the sheep.” (Shmot 21:37).

In addition to repaying the value of the stolen animal, we see that the thief has to pay a fine of four times the value of the ox (for a total of five times the value) or three times the value of the sheep (for a total of four times the value). The Gemara¹ discusses why there is a discrepancy between one who steals an ox, and one steals a sheep. Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai explains that when one steals an ox, the ox follows the thief on its own without the thief being required to carry it. In contrast, when a thief steals a sheep, he has to pick up the sheep and carry it on his shoulders, thereby suffering embarrassment. This embarrassment is taken into consideration and serves to reduce the severity of the fine.²

This is a remarkable idea. The Torah is discussing a thief who has no concern for the property of others. He does not care about other people or causing them suffering and inconvenience. Yet, Hashem is still sensitive to this thief's feelings! Perhaps we can learn from this how much more we should be sensitive to causing embarrassment to our friends.

Ironically, people may be less sensitive or caring of the feelings of those with whom they are most comfortable. For instance, people often poke fun at their friends in jest. However, even if the friend laughs along, they may in fact feel hurt inside. We need to be very aware of this this to ensure that we do not cause pain or embarrassment to our friends. The Shulchan Aruch³ rules that it is forbidden to call one's friend by an offensive nickname, even if the friend is accustomed to being called that name. The Gemara explains that this is a particularly serious sin and even considers it comparable in some respects to committing adultery!⁴

How can we increase our sensitivity to the feelings of others? It might be especially challenging to be sensitive towards people that are our competitors, people who may have hurt us in the past

¹ Baba Kamma 79b.

² Rebbe Meir gives a different explanation. He explains that an ox is involved in productive labour (e.g. ploughing a field). Stealing an ox causes it to cease its labour and is thus more serious than stealing a sheep. There is a lot to learn from this opinion as well, but that's another Darchai Noam.

³ Choshen Mishpat 228:5.

⁴ Baba Metzia 58b. The Gemara lists three sins that are punished with particular severity in the World to Come – adultery, humiliating someone in public and calling another with a derogatory name.

or people that we just don't like. It may be difficult to treat these people with respect and sensitivity.

A beautiful teaching of Rav Avigdor Miller⁵ may assist us in this regard. Rav Miller put together a list of ten steps to greatness. This is a program comprising ten short actions that one should try to do on a daily basis to help one become a great person.⁶ One of these steps is to actively try to see Hashem in everyone's face. Rav Miller recommends that every day we should look at someone's face (of the same gender) and remind ourselves that we are seeing a 'tzelem Elokim' – an image of G-d. This is based on the principle that man is created in the image of Hashem⁷. Embedded within the human soul is a spark of the greatness of Hashem. Rav Miller teaches that a face is like a screen and a neshama is like a projector that projects onto the face the glory of the human soul.

This is a very powerful technique which may, over time, train us to start treating others with more respect and sensitivity. Particularly when we are dealing with people that we struggle to get on with, we should pause before opening our mouths and remind ourselves that the other person is created in the Divine image of Hashem!

The following story provides an extreme example of how one can be sensitive to the feelings of others, even at great personal expense:

Rabbi Aryeh Levine was known as a saintly individual⁸. He was born in Russia and then lived in Eretz Yisrael until he passed away in 1969. Rabbi Levine was once summonsed to a court case. Someone was claiming that Rabbi Levine had guaranteed a loan and he demanded that the Rabbi repay the loan. As evidence, the man relied on a document that appeared to be signed by Rabbi Levine himself. Rabbi Levine knew that the document was a forgery. Whenever Rabbi Levine signed his name, he was always careful to place a dash between the letters "Yud" and "Heh" of his first name so as to avoid writing part of Hashem's name. There was no such dash on this document. Rabbi Levine realised that the man had forged the Rabbi's signature in a desperate attempt to alleviate his financial difficulties. However, if Rabbi Levine would explain to the court that the signature was a forgery the man would be very embarrassed. Rabbi Levine did not want to cause another person embarrassment. So, remarkably, he kept quiet and agreed to repay the loan. He made repayments every month for a number of years until the loan was fully repaid.

As we say in Ashrei, three times every day: "Hashem is good to all, and He is merciful to all of His works". Hashem is merciful to *all* of His creatures, even those that seem to be less deserving. Let's try to emulate Hashem by learning the above lesson from 'the ox and the sheep'.

Let's try something this week:

1. Remember the lesson from this week's Parsha – if Hashem recognises the embarrassment of a thief, then surely we can recognise and aim to reduce the embarrassment of those people closest to us.
2. Try to put Rav Avigdor Miller's suggestion into practice. Once a day, look at the face of another and remind ourselves that we are looking at a tzelem Elokim – an image of Hashem. Remember that embedded within this person is a spark of the Divine.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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

⁵ 1908-2001, a popular rabbi, speaker and author in the United States.

⁶ Google "Rav Miller ten steps" for further details.

⁷ Breishit 1:27.

⁸ This story was published in "A Tzaddik in our Time" by Simcha Raz.