

Its ways are ways of pleasantness - נעם דרכי דרכיה

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Breishit, September 2013

Welcome to the first instalment of Darchai Noam (**Ways of Pleasantness**). Please see below for more information about this weekly email and for instructions on how to subscribe and unsubscribe.

The message is meant for YOU!

Cain decides to bring some of his crops as an offering to Hashem. His brother Hevel likes the idea and also brings an offering from the best of his flock. Hashem accepts Hevel's offering but rejects Cain's offering. Cain becomes jealous. Hashem then gives Cain some mussar (a lecture on how to improve his moral behaviour) (Breishit 4:6).

In the next verse (Breishit 4:7), the Torah states:

"Cain said to his brother Hevel. Then, when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Hevel and killed him".

This verse seems to be incomplete. We know that Cain said something to Hevel, but the Torah doesn't seem to specify what he said. The Midrashim and the commentators try to recreate the discussion. However, according to the Ibn Ezra, the Torah does in fact tell us what Cain said to Hevel – it is set out in Breishit 4:6. Hashem gives Cain a powerful message on how to improve his character. But Cain doesn't take on the message and try to improve himself. Instead, Cain thinks: "That's a great message, and I know exactly who needs to hear it... my brother Hevel!" Cain then passes on the exact same message to Hevel.

Cain's mistake is that he doesn't realise, or doesn't want to accept, that the message from Hashem is directed at and tailor-made for him.

Rav Zev Leff tells a story about when he was a younger Rabbi in America. A member of his congregation was behaving inappropriately. At his next drasha, Rav Leff addressed the congregation and spoke strongly against the inappropriate behaviour without mentioning the individual offender by name. After the sermon, the offending party approached Rav Leff, smiling and he congratulated Rav Leff on a wonderful drasha. He said: "That was a powerful talk! I sure hope that the person it was intended for got the message!"

Often when we hear constructive criticism our egos jump to our defence, and we either consciously or subconsciously reject the criticism. "This criticism can't possibly be relevant to me!" or "It must be meant for someone else!" or "The person giving the criticism is being hypocritical and just needs to work on themselves." But, deep down, we all know that we are not perfect. We can all benefit from improvement and constructive criticism (even if it is just a reminder of how to deal with criticism!)

Imagine an athlete training for the next Olympics. The coach's job is to provide him with constructive criticism to perfect his technique and maximise his chances of success. The athlete would obviously be foolish to reject the criticism based on ego. Though it might be painful in the short term, a sensible athlete welcomes such a review, because he recognises that it will assist him to improve and reach his ultimate goal.

Let's try something this week:

1. When we hear any mussar in our presence, even if we overhear it indirectly, or read it accidentally, let us take it as a message from Hashem that it contains something that we personally need to hear. Let us examine it, accept it and apply it to ourselves, rather than passing it on to someone else.
2. Before we criticise someone else, let's stop for a moment and think carefully whether this criticism also applies to us.

By contemplating criticism and applying it to ourselves on a regular basis, we may come to realise that each particular piece of advice we are exposed to is both timely and ideally suited to us. At least on some level, the message truly is meant for us.

Chag Sameach and Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Allon Ledder

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About Darchai Noam

The passuk in Mishlei (3:17) describes the Torah as follows: "Its ways are ways of pleasantness (Darchai Noam) and all its paths are peace". The Torah is our guidebook for life. It is packed full of good advice as to how we should live our lives.

The aim of the Darchai Noam weekly email is to examine an idea from the weekly parashah relating to good middot (character traits). It will focus particularly on treating each other with respect and how to interact with each other in a more peaceful and pleasant manner. It will also suggest some practical tips for implementing these ideas in our daily lives.

By learning together each week, and making an effort to regularly put the ideas into practice, with Hashem's help we can all gradually improve our character traits and our observance of 'v'ahavta l'reiacha kamocho' – loving one's fellow as oneself.

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