

DARCHAI NOAM

Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם -

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Bo, January 2014

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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Bo – Speak nicely

This week's Parasha of Bo contains the last three of the ten plagues. Moshe has been coming to Pharaoh repeatedly, requesting him to "Let my People go". Pharaoh has been constantly changing his mind, first agreeing to let the people go and then retracting his offer. Pharaoh's behaviour has been frustrating to say the least. Infuriating might be a better description.

Let's now have a look at the final interaction between Moshe and Pharaoh which takes place in Shemot Chapters 10 and 11. Hashem has informed Moshe that the last plague is about to strike. Egypt will be decimated and Bnei Yisrael will finally go free. Pharaoh told Moshe that he would not see his face again and Moshe was about to leave in burning anger. This would seem to present a great opportunity for Moshe to tell Pharaoh what he really thinks of him!

But what does Moshe say?

'And all these servants of yours will come down to me and bow down to me, saying: "Go out, you and all the people who are at your feet," and afterwards I will go out.' Then he [Moshe] left Pharaoh with burning anger. (Sh'mot 11:8)

We see later (Sh'mot 12:31) that Pharaoh himself will get out of bed in the middle of the night and run through the streets looking for Moshe and Aharon to tell them to take Bnei Yisrael out of the land of Mitzrayim. Moshe knew that this is what would happen. So who was Moshe referring to when he talks about 'these servants of yours'?

Rashi explains that Moshe carefully chose his words in order to show respect to Pharaoh. Moshe refrained from saying that Pharaoh himself would bow down to Moshe because that way of speaking would be disrespectful to the throne. Moshe chose to phrase himself in an oblique and more respectful manner.

It's difficult to imagine the level of self control that Moshe's respectful words and tone require. Imagine what we would do if we were in Moshe's position. Remember how infuriating Pharaoh has been. Hashem has promised us that this was finally the end. We are never going to see him again. We would probably tell Pharaoh exactly what we thought of him. It would be highly unlikely for us to concern ourselves with diplomatic protocol or speaking respectfully to a king. Passionate phrases and perhaps some obscenities would probably be part of our diatribe. Yet Moshe was able to hold himself back and speak respectfully.

Admittedly we are not on Moshe Rabbeinu's level and we may struggle to speak respectfully under such extreme circumstances. However, we often use inappropriate and disrespectful language in ordinary, day to day circumstances!

The Gemara (Shabbat 33a) harshly criticises those that speak with 'nivul peh' (obscene language). Why? The Maharal explains that humans are distinguished from other creatures primarily by our capacity for speech. Only humans have the capacity to form verbal utterances into language in order to communicate ideas. One who degrades this capacity for speech is degrading the essence of their humanity¹.

¹ Masechet Shabbat 33a (Schottenstein edition), Artscoll, footnote 37.

Hashem Himself chooses his language with care. Each word in the Torah is placed there for a reason and is full of meaning. There are no extraneous words or letters in the Torah. Yet, in Parashat Noach (Breishit 7:2), the Torah refers to 'animals that are not pure' instead of using the more straightforward phrase: 'animals that are tamei (impure)'. In the Hebrew this works out as an extra two words, just to use a more polite language.

People may think that words are not so important. Does it really matter which words we use to express ourselves? As long as we comply with the laws of lashon hara (see Darchai Noam from two weeks ago) then it may be assumed that a little bit of colourful language would be harmless. But have a look at what the Nefesh HaChaim² has to say about our choice of words.

"...every word one speaks has an effect on the higher worlds...you cannot fathom how each single word you utter has either a constructive or destructive effect on the upper worlds... let me assure you that every trivial word or conversation is stored away and never lost...every word one speaks, even the sound of his voice is not discarded... thousands of winged angels take hold of the utterance and carry it up to the Heavenly Tribunal to be judged – either favourably, or the opposite, G-d forbid" (Nefesh HaChaim, Gate 1, Chapter 13)

Why do people resort to obscenities and improper language? We can suggest a few possible reasons:

- To express powerful or passionate feelings in a quick, easy way. It is a lazy way of expressing oneself rather than taking the time to use more refined language.
- To impress other people if they also use such language (ie peer group pressure).
- Out of force of habit or thoughtlessness.

How can we train ourselves to use proper, more refined speech and tone? Nowadays many people have lost respect for authority. But try to imagine that we are standing before someone that we greatly respect or fear. For example: a judge in court when we are on trial; the leading Torah scholar of the generation; our boss; our school principal; the parents of our fiancée when we were first introduced (when we were still trying to make a good impression). Would we use improper language when standing before such people? Or would we use beautiful, refined language? We need to remember that every word that we say is stored forever and is heard by Hashem himself! That should be enough of a motivation to speak appropriately.

If we can train ourselves to speak mindfully with appropriate, respectful words and tone, we would be emulating our great teacher Moshe, and Hashem Himself!

Let's try something this week:

1. Remind ourselves before we open our mouths that every word we say is being recorded and listened to by Hashem.
2. Make an effort to express ourselves with respectful and refined language and tone of voice.
3. If we feel strongly about something and feel at risk of conveying these feelings using inappropriate language, then write it down first. The slower process involved in writing as opposed to speaking can help to vent our passion and moderate our words when we do speak.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Allon Ledder

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² By Rav Chaim of Volozhin, the primary student of the Vilna Gaon.

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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