

DARCHAI NOAM

Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם

(Mishlei 3:17)

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Bo – mental gymnastics

In this week's Parsha of Bo, we read about the last three of the ten plagues. The final plague is the death of the firstborn. At Moshe and Pharaoh's final face to face meeting, Moshe warns Pharaoh about the impending plague.

*“Moshe said, ‘So said Hashem, **at about midnight** I will go out into the midst of Egypt, and every firstborn in the land of Egypt will die from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the firstborn of the maidservant who is behind the millstone and every firstborn animal. There shall be a great cry throughout the entire land of Egypt, such as there has never been and such as there shall never be again.”* (Sh'mot 11:4-6)

The description of the plague itself is as follows:

*“It came to pass **at midnight**, and Hashem smote every first born in the land of Egypt...”* (Sh'mot 12:29).

Since the plague struck exactly at midnight, the commentators question why Moshe used the phrase “at about midnight”. The Gemara¹ says that Hashem Himself certainly knows exactly when midnight is and he would not have spoken to Moshe in such vague terms. Moshe decided to change the prophecy from ‘*at midnight*’ to ‘*at about midnight*’. Why did he do so?

One of the Gemara's answers reveals a fascinating insight into human nature. The Gemara explains that Moshe was able to calculate the exact moment of midnight, however he was concerned that the Egyptian astrologers might err in their own calculations. If the plague did not start at their predicted (albeit erroneous) time, they would claim that Moshe was a liar, causing a desecration of Hashem's name (Chillul Hashem). To avoid this, Moshe deliberately used vague language.

An examination of the extent of the miracle of the tenth plague reveals just how ridiculous such a claim by the Egyptians would be. At precisely the same moment, every single first born in the entire land of Egypt was miraculously struck down. If there was no first born in the house, the oldest member of the house died instead. No Egyptian household escaped the plague. The whole country was in shock. And yet Bnei Yisrael was totally untouched. There was not one death amongst Bnei Yisrael that night, even amongst the elderly that were due to die. Hashem Himself obviously carried out such an amazing miracle.

Surely if the miracle had occurred slightly before or after the time that the Egyptian astrologers claimed was midnight it would be petty and ridiculous to claim that the whole miraculous night was a coincidence and was not from Hashem. Imagine the Egyptian astrologers stating as follows: “Aha! We caught you out Moshe! You predicted that the plague would commence at

¹ Brachot 3b.

exactly midnight. But according to our calculations the time is now 1 minute and 17 seconds past midnight! The plague is late and this means that you, Moshe, are a liar!”

How could anyone take such a claim seriously? And yet, Moshe was concerned about such an outcome. Moshe understood human nature. We humans are capable of the most far-fetched rationalisations when it suits us. Even in the face of clear evidence to the contrary we have an ability to interpret the facts to support what we want to believe. Pharaoh and the Egyptian astrologers did not want to believe in Hashem, so they would latch on to any ‘evidence’ that they could find to discredit Moshe or Hashem.

Many people employ this technique without realising it. For example, many atheists are prepared to believe very far-fetched and unlikely explanations for the creation of the universe (for example, it all just happened by chance). Underlying this stance is most probably a strong desire to avoid belief in a Creator to enable them to live their lives unburdened by Divine commandments.

However, there are positive aspects to this human ability to rationalise. For example, there are some circumstances where it is permitted to speak Lashon Hara in order to protect someone else from harm. If Reuven was planning to enter into a business partnership with Shimon, and we know that Shimon is dishonest, we are actually obligated to warn Reuven.² Reuven would then be obligated to do some mental gymnastics. On the one hand, he is not allowed to believe the negative information about Shimon. But on the other hand, he is entitled to take all necessary precautions. For example, he may decide not to enter into partnership with Shimon. This sounds like a difficult thing to do. How can we take all necessary precautions to protect ourselves from harm, but at the same time not believe the negative information?

Another example of this requirement to actively and deliberately force ourselves to interpret facts or behaviour in a manner that does not appear logical is in the realm of Dan l’Kaf Zchut. This is the requirement to give the benefit of the doubt to other people’s behaviour even when that behaviour seems negative and their motivations appear to be improper.

We can learn from the Egyptian astrologers that humans have an amazing ability to perform mental gymnastics and to interpret facts in a very creative way. Unlike the Egyptian astrologers, we can use this illogical, creative side to assist us to judge each other favourably and to practice v’ahavata l’re’echa kamocho.

Let’s try something this week:

1. Despite evidence to the contrary, we can make an effort to interpret information about others in a positive way. If necessary, we can use all of our creative powers.
2. Remember how we would want others to excuse us for any seemingly negative actions no matter how difficult and illogical such an excuse must be to adopt.
3. Take the opportunity to brush up on the laws of lashon hara. Especially the criteria under which lashon hara is permitted. Many people fall into the trap of assuming that lashon hara is permitted (eg for a potential shidduch) and then proceed to speak in a forbidden manner.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

² Even in cases where Lashon Hara is permitted, there are a number of conditions that must be satisfied. For example: we must verify the authenticity of the information; we must not exaggerate; we must have pure intentions and act for a positive purpose; there must be no other way to achieve the same outcome; we must be comfortable that our speech won’t cause the person in question to suffer out of proportion to what they deserve. A Rabbi should be consulted **before** we speak.

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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're'echa kamocho' – loving one's fellow as oneself.

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