

## DARCHAI NOAM

### Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat B'shalach, January 2014

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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

### B'shalach – Judging favourably

In this week's Parasha of B'shalach, Bnei Yisrael finally leave Mitzrayim. But before they can be free of Pharaoh once and for all, they face one final confrontation at the Reed Sea. Hashem is about to perform perhaps the most famous, open miracle of all time - the splitting of the sea.

We all know the ending - Bnei Yisrael walk through to safety on dry land and the Egyptian army gets washed away. But the Midrash (Yalkut Shimoni 1:234) reveals that the outcome was not so clear cut. On the night before the sea split (see Sh'mot 14:19-20) the pillar of cloud that had been travelling in front of Bnei Yisrael moved behind them to protect them from the Egyptians. For the entire night the cloud stayed there and prevented the Egyptians from drawing near to Bnei Yisrael. What was going on during that long night?

The Midrash tells us that a heavenly court case was being held. Bnei Yisrael were on trial. The prosecuting angel had a very strong case. He said that it was not fair for Bnei Yisrael to be saved while the Egyptians were to be drowned because both nations worshipped idols!

The prosecuting angel's argument was very convincing. While in Egypt, Bnei Yisrael were also involved in idol worship just like the Egyptians. So why should they be treated any differently than the Egyptians? But Hashem rejected this prosecuting angel's argument and decided to save Bnei Yisrael while allowing the Egyptians to drown. Why?

Because Hashem could see below the surface of Bnei Yisrael's behaviour and into their hearts. Hashem could see Bnei Yisrael's true intentions. This allowed him to distinguish between the behaviour of the Egyptians, who worshipped idols as a matter of choice, and Bnei Yisrael, who did not choose to worship idols but were doing so under duress. There is a huge difference between actions performed by choice and actions performed under duress.

What can we learn from this story?

Many of us look around at others in our lives and judge them. When we see a person acting in a certain way, we may immediately pass judgement on that person in our minds. Often we judge other people so automatically and quickly that we may not even realise that we are doing it.

The Mishnah in Pirkei Avot (1:6) teaches us that there is an obligation to judge everyone favourably. In his commentary to the Mishnah, the Rambam provides precise guidelines to fulfil this obligation,<sup>1</sup> depending on the type of person being judged:

- An **average person** (one who is not particularly pious or sinful). We must give this person the benefit of the doubt, if there is reasonable room for doubt. Thus, if an act can be interpreted in two ways, we must judge this type of person favourably. For example, if we see such a person walking out of a non-kosher restaurant, we should assume that they were there for a legitimate purpose such as to use the bathroom or to get change. In circumstances where there really is no room for doubt (eg we clearly saw them committing a sin), then we can interpret their act in a realistic manner and we don't have to conjure up a far-fetched

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.torah.org/learning/pirkei-avos/chapter1-6b.html>.

interpretation of the act. However, even in such cases it is still meritorious to look for a favourable or extenuating factor.

- A **righteous person**. We must view this person favourably, even if the circumstances don't warrant it and where his behaviour appears clearly sinful. Even if we clearly see such a person sin, we should assume that they repented.
- A person who is known to be **wicked** (someone who publicly and unashamedly rebels against Judaism). We do not have any obligation to judge such a person favourably. In fact, we should assume that they are acting inappropriately. If their actions appear to be correct, we should assume that they are merely trying to create a respectable image to cover up their behaviour. There is an important caveat though – these days it is actually very difficult to find someone who fits into this category. Someone who is ignorant of Judaism and who doesn't really appreciate its true beauty is not called wicked.

Note that on a practical level, even though we are obligated to judge people favourably, we can still take precautions to protect ourselves and others from behaviour that might cause damage.

It is important to note the exact wording of this Mishnah in Pirkei Avot. The usual translation is: "Judge every person favourably". However some commentators point out that the literal translation is actually "Judge **the whole person** favourably". This suggests that whenever we judge another person, we must take into account the whole person. What is "the whole person"? We have to consider a large number of factors that are relevant to why the person is acting the way that they are, including their history, their predispositions, their emotions, what happened to them earlier that day, their upbringing and what is going on in their hearts and minds. We cannot truly judge a person unless we take into account **all** of these relevant factors. And since it is clearly impossible for us - as mere mortals - to do, then we can never truly and accurately judge another person.

As the old saying goes: "Before you criticize someone, you should walk a mile in their shoes. That way when you criticize them, you are a mile away from them and you have their shoes!"<sup>2</sup>

Most of us have enough trouble understanding ourselves and we have been wearing our own shoes all of our lives!!

Only Hashem understands the whole person. Only He can look into their hearts and minds and understand what is really going on. Just like he did when Bnei Yisrael were about to cross the sea. Hashem understood the real intentions of Bnei Yisrael when they worshipped idols in Mitzrayim and he passed favourable judgement. Anyone else would not know Bnei Yisrael's true intentions and it would be impossible for them to accurately or fairly pass judgement.

If Hashem had not judged the "whole person" on that fateful night thousands of years ago, then Bnei Yisrael would have drowned with the Egyptians and we, as their descendants, would not be here today. Justice demands that we remember this fact before we pass judgement on others.

Let's try something this week:

1. Learn and revise the parameters of the obligation to judge others favourably, as outlined above.
2. Remember that we are only alive today because Hashem judged the "whole person". It is impossible for us, as mere mortals, to accurately judge anyone else with the same full picture.
3. Before we judge others, keep in mind how frustrating it would be for us to be judged by someone else without them being aware of all of our relevant circumstances, feelings, and thoughts.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Allon Ledder

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<sup>2</sup> Jack Handey, comedian.

## **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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