

## DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

### “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

B'shalach  
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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

### **B'shalach – why do we act the way we act?**

In this week's Parsha of B'shalach we read about Bnei Yisrael's journey from Mitzrayim. After the miraculous splitting of the sea and the final destruction of the Egyptian army, certain practical matters needed to be taken care of, including how to feed 3 million people in the middle of the desert. During their journey through the desert for 40 years, Hashem provided Bnei Yisrael with manna which fell from Heaven.

Each person received an omer of manna to last them for one day. They were commanded not to store any leftovers for the next day. Datan and Aviram, the infamous troublemakers, deliberately saved their manna and it became infested.<sup>1</sup> Moshe was angry with them for disobeying Hashem's commandment.

Bnei Yisrael discovered that double the normal quantity of manna fell on Friday. Moshe explained that they should save half of the manna to eat on Shabbat because no manna would fall on that day. Unlike regular days, the manna that they would keep for Shabbat would not become infested. On Shabbat some people went out to look for manna (contrary to Moshe's command) but they did not find any.<sup>2</sup>

In order to stir up further trouble and prove Moshe wrong, Datan and Aviram played a trick.<sup>3</sup> They went out on Friday night and scattered some manna in the fields. Then, on Shabbat morning, they invited people to go out into the fields with them to collect the manna that they had secretly planted. However, the birds had eaten all of the manna that they had scattered in the fields thereby thwarting their devious plan.

Datan and Aviram's behaviour seems quite insane. They set out to 'prove' that Moshe was a liar even though they knew that their proof was a total fabrication. What was really driving this behaviour?

The Gemara<sup>4</sup> teaches: “Someone who has [today's] bread in his basket, and asks, ‘What will I eat tomorrow?’ lacks faith”. It is said that the Arizal never kept any food for the next day. His cupboards were always empty. He forced himself not to save anything for the next day so that he would constantly have to turn to Hashem and develop his emunah.<sup>5</sup> The prohibition against storing manna for the next day was a difficult lesson in emunah which took 40 years for Bnei Yisrael to learn. Each night Bnei Yisrael would go to sleep with an empty cupboard and no provisions for the next day. They would need to have faith in Hashem that the miraculous manna would fall again the next day. Relying on someone else means admitting that we are vulnerable and not in control. Humans by their nature do not like to feel vulnerable. We like to feel in control. Perhaps Datan and Aviram felt uncomfortable being so obviously reliant on Hashem for their food and that was the underlying reason for their plot.

Datan and Aviram's behaviour is reminiscent of another story that took place many years later. When Yehoshua brought Bnei Yisrael into the land, the first city that was destroyed was Yericho. Yehoshua wanted the ruins of Yericho to remain forever as a reminder of the miraculous victories against the Canaanites. He therefore issued a curse against anyone who would rebuild the city. That person's firstborn son would die when the foundations were laid and their sons would continue to die until the last one who

<sup>1</sup> Parshat B'shalach, Shmot 16:20 and Rashi's commentary on that verse (based on the Midrash in Shmot Rabbah 25:10).

<sup>2</sup> Parshat B'shalach, Shmot 16:27.

<sup>3</sup> The source of this well-known tradition is difficult to locate. It does not appear to be a Midrash.

<sup>4</sup> Sotah 48b.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in “Trust Me! An Anthology of Emunah and Bitachon”, by Rabbi Eliezer Parkoff, page 17.

would die when the city was completed<sup>6</sup>. Hundreds of years later, Chiel decided to rebuild the city of Jericho<sup>7</sup>. Yehoshua's curse was fulfilled to the letter – all of Chiel's sons died during the building process. One might presume that Chiel, knowing of Yehoshua's curse, would eventually get the message and stop the project! But he refused to believe that his son's deaths were being caused by the curse – he attributed their deaths to natural causes. Chiel was later involved in another incident that was in the same vein as Datan and Aviram's plan in our Parsha. In one of the most dramatic moments in the Tanach, Eliyahu Hanavi challenged the priests of Baal<sup>8</sup> to a showdown on Har Carmel in front of the wayward Jewish people<sup>9</sup>. Eliyahu built an alter to Hashem and the false prophets built an alter to the Baal. Eliyahu claimed that only Hashem would send down a miraculous fire to consume his sacrifice. This is what actually happened, prompting the entire Jewish people to declare "Hashem is the true G-d". Meanwhile, Chiel was hiding underneath the alter to Baal, planning to light the fire from below and make it look like a miraculous fire. However, before he could put his plan into action Hashem sent a poisonous snake to kill him.<sup>10</sup>

What was Chiel thinking!?! Why did he go to such trouble to make Eliyahu look like a fake and to give the appearance that Baal had real power? His behaviour seems farcical. The Midrash tells us that Chiel had the potential to be a great man, but there was something fundamentally wrong. Something that was pushing him to act in such a distorted manner. The commentators explain that he was too addicted to idol worship<sup>11</sup>. It seems that Chiel had a strong drive for pleasure and honour and he believed that these drives could not be satisfied by serving Hashem. This ultimately led him to go to such lengths to 'prove' that Eliyahu was wrong.

The behaviour of Datan and Aviram and Chiel seems ludicrous. However, we need to ask ourselves whether we are also sometimes guilty of such behaviour. Do we ever act in a manner that does not really make sense because there is an underlying drive, or a base desire or fear, that is pushing us to act in that way? Of course we do! Each of us needs to contemplate this matter for ourselves, however here are two possible examples where people behave in a seemingly irrational manner:

- Many of us honestly believe in Hashem and His mitzvot. Yet we don't always keep Hashem's mitzvot in the way that we should. Why not? Usually it's because our baser needs and drives are influencing our behaviour. Perhaps it's the drive for pleasure, perhaps we have a measure of laziness, or the desire to feel in 'control' (or maybe it's all three!)
- Some people spend too long at work at the expense of their family. They may justify this choice based on their need to earn a livelihood. However, the efforts they invest may be greater than necessary. Perhaps they have a desire for more materialism or maybe they are jealous of their more affluent neighbour?

These examples may cause some readers to feel uncomfortable (including me!). I apologise for that. It is not an easy task to look honestly at our behaviour and try to understand our drives and prejudices. Yet, if we want to truly grow, we need to have self-awareness and be honest with ourselves. By slowly and painfully chipping away at our negative middot and baser drives we will hopefully end up acting less irrationally and find it easier to make choices in line with Torah values.

Let's try something this week:

1. Contemplate the stories of Datan and Aviram and Chiel and consider their underlying drives and prejudices which influenced their behaviour.
2. Honestly assess our own behaviours and try to understand why we do what we do. Remember, there is always room for improvement.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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<sup>6</sup> Yehoshua 6:26.

<sup>7</sup> See Melachim Aleph 16:34 and Gemara Sanhedrin 113a.

<sup>8</sup> Baal was a common form of idol worship that was very difficult to eradicate.

<sup>9</sup> This story is brought in Chapter 18 of Melachim Aleph.

<sup>10</sup> Midrash Yalkut Shimoni 2:214 and see "The Family Midrash Says - Melachim Aleph", p274.

<sup>11</sup> See "The Family Midrash Says - Melachim Aleph", p250, quoting the Kli Yakar and the Maharal.

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The pasuk 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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