

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Chayai Sarah
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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Chayai Sarah – Don’t just talk, do something!

In this week’s Parsha of Chayai Sarah, we read about Avraham buying a plot of land to bury his dear wife Sarah¹. Despite being promised the entire land of Canaan by Hashem, Avraham had to pay an exorbitant price for the burial plot.

We read about Avraham’s negotiations with Ephron the Hittite, the owner of the burial site that Avraham wished to purchase. Ephron was a big talker, full of empty promises.

Avraham asked to buy the burial site, which was located in a cave, for its full price.

Ephron answered (in the public earshot, making sure that everyone could hear):

“No my lord, listen to me. I have given you the field and the cave that is in it, I have given it to you. In the view of the children of my people, I have given it to you, bury your dead”.

Ephron offered to give as a gift to Avraham the cave as well as the entire field in which the cave was located. However, Ephron’s offer was a sham. He actually intended to sell the entire field to Avraham for an inflated price. As Ephron expected, Avraham insisted on paying for the land. He wanted to own it outright. Ephron replied:

“My lord, listen to me; land worth four hundred shekels of silver, what is it between me and you? Bury your dead.”

Ephron mentioned a huge price and then downplayed its significance. But Avraham understood Ephron’s meaning very well. Ephron then insisted on superior coins, each of which was many times the value of an ordinary shekel.² The final price that was paid is estimated at around 1 million ordinary shekels!³

The Gemara⁴ cites this incident as teaching us that one sign of wickedness is to talk big but do little. In comparison, righteous people generally say little but do a lot. The Gemara’s example is Avraham himself, cited in last week’s parsha. When the three angels came to visit Avraham, he offered them a bit of bread and water, but ended up serving them a huge feast.

There are a number of other sources which teach us the value of talking less:

“He who watches his mouth and his tongue guards his soul from troubles.” (Mishlai 21:23)

“Shammai says... say little and do much” (Pirkai Avot 1:15)

“...[Rabban] Shimon [ben Gamliel] would say: “All my life I have been raised among the wise, and I have found nothing better for the body than silence....one who speaks excessively brings on sin” (Pirkai Avot 1:18)

“Rabbi Akiva would say...a protective fence for wisdom is silence” (Pirkai Avot 3:17)

“Silence is good for the wise, certainly it is good for the foolish” (Gemara Pesachim 99a)

¹ The plot of land is located in Hebron.

² Gemara Baba Metzia 87a with Rashi.

³ Artscroll Stone edition of the Chumash, footnote 16 to Breishit 23:16.

⁴ Baba Metzia 87a.

It's far easier to talk than to actually do something. Why is talking big associated with evil? It shows that the person is seeking an effortless way to improve their reputation and make themselves appear great in the eyes of others. Such a person often cares more about what others think of him than the truth.

However, there is also an interesting psychological principle at play here. People who talk a lot about their plans have often been found to do less. Mishlai⁵ mentions the concept of "אביל שפתיים" "eveel s'fatayim" – one who talks foolishly. According to Mishlai, such a person will become weary. How so? Rav Avigdor Miller explains that this is referring to people who say that they will do something and then don't do it. How can we explain this? One explanation may be that by talking about doing something we erroneously attribute the energy that we expended on talking to our hard work instead. We incorrectly think that we have already invested a lot of time and energy into the task and therefore feel that we can now take it easy!

A more kabbalistic explanation may be that we alert the Yetzer Hara to our positive intentions and give it ample opportunity to step in and thwart the plan before its inception.

The Rashbatz⁶ advises us as follows: "One should try not to verbalise their intentions to perform a good deed, for once you state your plans, they tend to go awry. If you say little, keeping your good plans to yourself, you will succeed and do much."⁷

The first day of university for the new students was a day devoted to orientation and study skills. One of the experienced educators advised the bright new students as follows: "Imagine that you have 2 weeks to your final exam. Some people spend an entire day doing an elaborate study plan, dividing up all of the material in such a way that they can cover it all in the time that they have. But then they get to the end of the day and realise that the first day is already gone! It was spent on planning! So they spend the entire next day re-adjusting their study plans so as to fit into the shorter time that they have. Don't make that mistake! Just study!"

The following story can teach us a better method of actualising our goals⁸:

Instead of sliding down the slide⁹ the children in the park were trying to climb up it. It was fun, but it was almost impossible. Finally, after some time, one little boy decided to give it a try. He patiently and carefully made his way to the top. One of the mothers asked the boy the secret of his success. The boy, who would later grow up to be a great Rabbi, answered as follows: "All the other children kept on looking backwards to see how far they had climbed. I just kept looking forwards to see how much there was still to do."

Instead of looking back at how much we have already done, we should try to focus on what is left to do. And then just do it, without pontificating or procrastinating.

This advice applies to learning Torah, performing mitzvot, performing acts of chessed and every worthwhile activity. Let's learn from Avraham instead of Ephron. Talk less and use the saved energy to do more.

Don't just talk, do something!

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to talk less about your plans, especially your future intentions to perform a good deed.
2. When planning how to accomplish your goals, instead of focusing on the past and what you have already accomplished, try to focus on the task ahead. And then just do it!

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

⁵ Proverbs 10:8, 10

⁶ Rav Shimon ben Tzemach Duran (1361-1444).

⁷ Magen Avot, commentary on Pirkai Avot.

⁸ I read this story many years ago but unfortunately, I do not remember the source or the name of the Rabbi.

⁹ "Slippery dip" for Australian readers.

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About Darchai Noam

Darchai Noam is available online at www.darchai-noam.com. You can access this week's edition of Darchai Noam, archived back issues of Darchai Noam and other divrei Torah.

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, usually 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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