

## DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

### “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

### Vaera – lessons from the hail

In this week's Parsha of Vaera we read about seven of the ten plagues with which Hashem punished the Egyptians. Though even a simple reading of the pasukim demonstrates the miraculous nature of these plagues, the Midrashim reveal even more miraculous aspects to them.<sup>1</sup> One example of the many miracles within miracles was the plague of hail, the last plague we read about this week. Inside each hailstone was fire. Thus, if something wasn't damaged by the hail, it was burnt by the fire!

The miraculous nature of the fiery hail is obvious. Fire and ice have opposing physical properties, which means that they cannot co-exist within the normal laws of nature. If the fire was stronger it should have melted the ice. And if the ice was stronger it should have extinguished the fire. How was the fire and ice able to work together in harmony in this case?<sup>2</sup>

The reason why such opposing forces were able to co-exist is because the fire and the ice were both serving Hashem's will. The fire and ice were both nullified in the presence of Hashem to the point where the difference between them became insignificant.

We can learn a lesson from these hailstones to apply to our daily lives. There may be many people in our lives that we struggle to co-exist with, just like the fire and ice. These may include people who have hurt us in some way, people with different political beliefs, people with different levels of religiosity and people with 'annoying habits'. In some cases we may just have a personality clash with certain people even if we cannot identify a particular reason. Though it may be tempting to simply avoid these people, sometimes this is just not realistic or possible. Maybe they are our neighbour, or they sit next to us in shule. Maybe they are our work colleague or maybe they are members of our family.

How can we learn to co-exist with these people? Perhaps we can learn a lesson from the hail and fire in this week's Parsha. If we can focus on nullifying ourselves before Hashem, then the differences between us and our 'annoying acquaintance' can become much less significant and more manageable. We might accomplish this by focusing on how great Hashem is and how insignificant we are in comparison. For example, the Rambam teaches that by studying Hashem's greatness we develop an awe of Him as we realise how insignificant we are. When we see ourselves as insignificant, then by extension, our petty squabbles or the discomfort that we feel in the presence of annoying neighbours can start to seem less significant as well.

Many of the great tzaddikim in Tanach had a healthy sense of humility and an understanding of how insignificant they were in comparison to Hashem. For example:

- Avraham: "I am but dust and ashes" (Breishit 18:27)
- Moshe and Aharon: "For what are we?" (Shmot 16:7-8)
- David HaMelech: "I am but a worm and not a man" (Tehillim 22:7)
- Isaiah: "I am a man of unclean lips" (Isaiah 6:5)
- Jeremiah: "I cannot speak, for I am a child" (Jeremiah 1:6)

<sup>1</sup> An excellent source to learn these Midrashim is the very readable "Let My Nation Go" by Yosef Deutsch.

<sup>2</sup> The following is based on an insight taught by R' Dovid Tsap.

Genuine humility can be difficult to achieve. And ironically, working on our humility can lead us to feeling pride in what we have accomplished. It's like the old joke about a man sitting in shule and trying to work on his humility. He would repeat to himself over and over again: "I'm a nothing. I'm a nothing". Another man thought this was a good idea. He sat down next to the first man and did the same thing. The first man looked at the second man with disdain and said "Look who thinks he's a nothing!"

Focusing on our own insignificance and making ourselves 'batel' (nullified) can be difficult to do because it involves overcoming our own egos. In his third volume of "Bilvavi Mishkan Evneh", Rav Itamar Shwartz cites the example of Rav Yerucham Levovitz who consciously chose to practice being batel by deliberately doing something that he didn't want to do, or holding back from doing something that he wanted to do, five times every day. This is quite an advanced level and certainly not something to aim for at the start.

However, perhaps there is an easier, more achievable starting point. Almost every day things happen that do not go according to our plan. It could be a major event or it could be a minor inconvenience. When things go wrong we often feel annoyed or frustrated as a result. We might feel a sense of entitlement that things should go our way and feel offended that our entitlement has been derailed. When something does go wrong, as it inevitably will, we can try this avodah of consciously trying to nullify our sense of entitlement and just accepting the situation. If Hashem has decreed that something should not go smoothly for us, then we can remind ourselves - who are we to disagree!

Pirkei Avot teaches us that we should nullify our own desires when they are different from what Hashem wants. If we do this practice sincerely, then midah k'neged midah (measure for measure) Hashem will nullify the desire of others when they are inconsistent with what we want.<sup>3</sup>

Nullifying our sense of entitlement and increasing our humility can help us get on with difficult people and it can also help us on the path to becoming great (like the tzaddikim listed above). Finally, it can also have the added advantage of making us happier, as the following anecdote demonstrates:

*Reuven was invited to Levi's wedding. When he arrived he was very disappointed to see that he was placed on a 'bad table'.<sup>4</sup> It was far from the head table and right near the band's noisy loudspeaker. Reuven considered himself a close friend of Levi and he felt that he was entitled to a better seat. Shimon was seated at the same table as Reuven. Unlike Reuven, Shimon did not feel that he was entitled to a better seat. He was so grateful to be invited to share in the simcha and he was just happy to be there. Reuven had a miserable time at the wedding while Shimon had a wonderful time.<sup>5</sup>*

Let's try something this week:

1. When we are forced to interact with 'difficult people' we can strive to remember the lesson of the hail and the fire. If we consciously focus on how insignificant we are in comparison to Hashem then it might help to make it easier for us to forgo our expectations, competitiveness or anger and just learn to accept.
2. When things don't go our way, instead of feeling frustrated or angry, try to remember that Hashem makes sure that we get what we really need and what we deserve, not what we think we deserve or what we feel entitled to.

<sup>3</sup> Avot 2:4.

<sup>4</sup> Outside of Israel the seating arrangement for guests at a wedding is usually planned in advance. In Israel guests at a wedding are usually not assigned seats. Everyone just sits where they like. This is not a bad idea at all as it can save a lot of heartache! (Except when you accidentally sit in the only assigned seats – that belonging to the bride and groom! My son and I actually did this by accident at a recent wedding. Oops!)

<sup>5</sup> This story is based on a true episode, and no doubt occurs on many occasions.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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### **About Darchai Noam**

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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