

## DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

### “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Vaera  
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

### Vaera – don't get angry!

In this week's Parsha of Vaera, we read about seven of the ten plagues with which Hashem struck Mitzrayim. The second plague was the plague of frogs.

The beginning of the plague is described as follows:

*“And Aaron stretched out his hand over the waters of Egypt, and the **frog** came up and covered the land of Egypt”.* (Our Parsha, Shmot 8:2)

We all know that the plague of frogs consisted of many frogs that jumped all over the place and invaded all the Egyptians' living spaces. So why does the pasuk refer to 'one frog' in the singular?

Based on the Midrash,<sup>1</sup> Rashi explains that initially one frog came out of the river. The Egyptians tried to kill this frog by hitting it, but their attempts backfired, causing the frog to miraculously multiply into more frogs. Each time the frog was hit, the frog split again, until it multiplied into many swarms of frogs. Eventually, there were so many frogs that they filled the land of Egypt.

The Steipler Gaon asks a very simple question on this episode<sup>2</sup>. Why did the Egyptians continue to hit the frog when they saw that their actions simply caused more frogs to appear? Why didn't they learn their lesson? The Steipler Gaon explains that the Egyptians were reacting out of anger. He teaches a powerful lesson from this – when people are angry, they often act irrationally and do foolish things.

The Orchot Tzaddikim<sup>3</sup> discusses the trait of anger. He refers to it as a disease of the soul. He explains that anger deprives man of his reasoning, so that he becomes even angrier and makes irrational decisions, as we saw with the foolish Egyptians. When we are not thinking straight, we are much more likely to fall into sin. That is why Eliyahu HaNavi advised Rebbi Yehuda “Do not become angry and do not sin”.<sup>4</sup>

The Orchot Tzaddikim also teaches that people who are angry are not able to concentrate on their tefillah. At the best of times many of us struggle to retain the appropriate kavana during our tefillah. Being angry only makes this situation even more difficult.

We learn from the behaviour of the Egyptians that anger leads to error. Even the great Moshe Rabbeinu became angry three times, as recorded in the Torah. On each occurrence, his anger caused him to make erroneous decisions:

- Moshe became angry with Itamar and Elazar. Consequently, he erred about the halacha relating to the special offerings that they had just brought (Parashat Shemini, Vayikra 10:16-17)
- Moshe became angry at Bnei Yisrael. He then hit the rock to bring forth water instead of speaking to it (Parashat Chukat, Bamidbar 20:10-11)
- Moshe became angry at the soldiers who had gone to war against Midian. Consequently, he forgot the law about how to kasher the utensils that they had captured. Elazar had to fill in and teach this law to the returning soldiers (Parashat Matot, Bamidbar 31:14)

<sup>1</sup> Midrash Tanchuma, Vaera 14.

<sup>2</sup> See “The Plague of Frogs” by Rabbi Yehoshua Gefen, <http://www.aish.com/tp/i/g/The-Plague-of-Frogs.html>

<sup>3</sup> The Ways of the Tzaddikim, the Gate of Anger. Orchot Tzaddikim is a book on Jewish ethics written anonymously in Germany in the 15th century.

<sup>4</sup> Brachot 29b.

To borrow the words of the Orchos Tzaddikim:

*“if this happened to Moshe our teacher, the father of the Sages, what happens to fools [like us] who become angry!”*

On the other hand, there is great praise for one who is able to suppress their trait of anger.

*“One who is slow to anger is better than a hero, and one who rules over his spirit is better than one who conquers a city” (Mishlai 16:32)*

This suggests that it takes great effort to overcome anger and it is not a natural thing to do.

The Orchos Tzaddikim provides us with some good advice in relation to reigning in this character trait.

Firstly, he tells us that if we want to know whether a person would make a good friend, we should observe how they behave when angry. The way a person acts when they are angry reveals a lot about their true character.<sup>5</sup>

Secondly, he tells us to be particularly careful when we are under pressure or suffering from some sort of trouble or affliction. It is at those times that we are more susceptible to losing our temper. Thus, we should be extra vigilant to manage our emotions and control our reactions when, for example, we are hungry or sleep-deprived.

The Rambam advises us to aim for the ‘golden mean’ in all of our character traits. We should try not to go too far to either extreme. The only two exceptions are pride and anger. Both of these character traits should be minimised as much as possible. There are very few situations in which it is appropriate to express anger. In some circumstances, it may be appropriate to ‘put on’ an angry face (for instance when disciplining children). However, we should not express true anger if we feel it inside.<sup>6</sup>

Some of our great leaders worked on their anger to an unbelievable level. There is a well-known story about Hillel that appears in the Gemara:<sup>7</sup>

*Hillel was known as someone who never got angry. Two people made a bet - the one who could succeed in making Hillel angry would win the bet and receive a large sum of money. One of the men went late on a Friday afternoon when Hillel was busy in the bathhouse preparing for Shabbat. He stood in the street and called out for Hillel in a rude manner. Hillel patiently got dressed, came outside and said “Yes my son, how can I help you?” The man said that he had an important question to ask and then proceeded to ask a silly question that could quite easily have waited until a more convenient time. Hillel patiently answered the question and then returned to his Shabbat preparations. The man then repeated the whole performance a number of times, but each time Hillel had the same response: “Yes, my son, how can I help you?” No matter how hard the man tried he could not get Hillel to lose his temper. Eventually the man cursed Hillel and blamed him for causing him to lose the bet. Hillel responded that it is better to lose the bet and to lose a large sum of money than to lose your temper.*

The following is one piece of advice that we can follow to help us work on our anger. It comes from the Iggeret HaRamban - the Ramban’s letter that he wrote to his eldest son with instructions to read it weekly.

*“Get into the habit of always speaking calmly to everyone. This will keep you from anger, a serious character flaw which causes people to sin.”*

The Orchos Tzaddikim also advises not to look at the face of the person who we are angry with because this will only serve to stir up our anger. We should rather speak to them softly without looking at them, and in that way the anger will be expelled from our heart.

Let's try something this week:

1. Reflect on the foolish behaviour of the Egyptians and remember that anger causes us to act irrationally and make unwise decisions.
2. Try to follow the Ramban’s advice – get into the habit of speaking calmly to everyone.
3. When angry, try to speak softly without making eye contact.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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<sup>5</sup> See also Eruvin 65b.

<sup>6</sup> Rambam, Hilchos Deiot 2:3.

<sup>7</sup> Shabbat 31a.

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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, 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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