

## DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

### “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Vaera  
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

### Vaera – Having compassion, even on our enemies

In this week's Parasha of Vaera, we read about seven of the ten plagues with which Hashem struck the Egyptians. Moshe and Aaron confront Pharaoh and ask him to send Bnei Yisrael free. Every time that Pharaoh refuses, he and his people are hit with another plague. Yet if we look closely at the narrative, we will notice that Moshe doesn't warn Pharaoh before every plague. Pharaoh only received a warning before the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> plagues.<sup>1</sup> The other plagues come without warning. Why?

The Malbim explains that the 10 plagues were divided into three sets of three plus the final plague of the firstborn.<sup>2</sup> The final plague was designed to totally break Pharaoh's resistance and to finally bring about the exodus. Each set of three plagues was designed to teach the Egyptians (and indeed the rest of the world) an important lesson. The first set was to prove that Hashem existed. The second set was to prove that Hashem is involved in this world. The final set was to prove that Hashem is not matched by any other power.<sup>3</sup> Within each set of plagues, only the first two plagues required a warning. These two plagues were like witnesses that established the principle in question<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, once the principle has been established, the third plague in the set did not need a warning.

The Ramban has a different explanation. In his commentary,<sup>5</sup> the Ramban argues that Hashem only warned Pharaoh in relation to the plagues that threatened the lives of the Egyptians. For some plagues, the life threatening nature is obvious, but for other plagues it is less so. The Ramban provides us with some examples:

- The plague of blood took away their drinking water which was clearly life threatening (the Egyptians were required to purchase drinking water from Bnei Yisrael to avoid dying of dehydration).
- Though the plague of frogs does not appear to be life threatening, the Midrash<sup>6</sup> notes that the frogs made the Egyptians sterile which was a form of destruction and therefore also warranted a warning.
- The plague of locusts caused famine which led to the death of Egyptians.
- Though the plague of pestilence mainly killed the Egyptian's animals, it was also capable of affecting man and therefore it warranted a warning.

In contrast, the plagues that were not life threatening (lice, boils and darkness) did not need a warning. The Ramban explains that the warnings were an act of mercy by Hashem. Hashem was giving Pharaoh and the Egyptians a chance to change their mind and let Bnei Yisrael free before being punished with death.

This process of warning before punishing demonstrates Hashem's compassion to our enemies. Indeed, our job is to emulate Hashem and one of the defining characteristics of the Jewish people is compassion.<sup>7</sup> We can see this characteristic in the custom to blow the shofar 100 times on Rosh Hashana. The source for

<sup>1</sup> We will read about the 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> plagues in next week's Parasha of Bo.

<sup>2</sup> See Artscroll Stone edition Chumash – footnote to Shmot 7:14 which discusses this idea.

<sup>3</sup> Other commentators explain this differently.

<sup>4</sup> According to Halacha, two witnesses are generally required to establish any principle. (There are exceptions to this rule.)

<sup>5</sup> See the Ramban's commentary to Shmot 8:15.

<sup>6</sup> Shmot Rabbah 10:3.

<sup>7</sup> Gemara Yevamot 79a. The other two characteristics are being bashful and kindly.

this custom<sup>8</sup> is the 100 wailings of the mother of Sisera who was killed in battle.<sup>9</sup> Sisera's brutal mother was hoping that her son had succeeded in massacring the Jewish people and was busy collecting spoils and slaves! Nevertheless, we acknowledge the sorrow of a mother over her son. Even such a mother deserves our compassion.

Another example of showing compassion to our enemies appears in the book of Melachim Bet<sup>10</sup>. The King of Aram was harassing the kingdom of Israel but he was being outwitted every time because the prophet Elisha<sup>11</sup> would warn Yehoram, the king of Israel, before every attack. On one particular raid, Elisha davened to Hashem to strike the army with a type of blindness. Elisha then managed to lead the entire army right into the capital city of Israel.<sup>12</sup> He then davened to Hashem to open their eyes so they saw that they were trapped. This gave the King of Israel a golden opportunity to wipe out the entire army. However, on Elisha's advice, he did not seize this opportunity. Rather he gave them food and water and sent them back home.

Sometimes showing mercy to our enemy can be a great kiddush Hashem. There are well-known stories about the Israeli air force dropping warning leaflets over Gaza before a bomb raid to destroy terrorist infrastructure. They provided civilians with sufficient warning to vacate the area and save their lives<sup>13</sup>. Perhaps they were following in the footsteps of Moshe and the many warnings that he provided to Pharaoh in our Parasha. Of course, when it comes to self-defence and preservation of life, there may be no room for mercy. It takes careful consideration and wisdom to discern when to act in an uncompromising manner and when to show some compassion towards our enemies.

How can this lesson apply to us? Most of us are not the general of an army or a prime minister! However, there are times when we need to speak or act in a harsh manner. Perhaps we are disciplining our child or a student. Perhaps we need to criticise an employee or rebuke a friend. When planning how to do so, we should also think about how we can also demonstrate some compassion, to make the rebuke less painful for the recipient. Such a balance is evident in the following anecdote:

*When Rabbi Dr Abraham J. Twersky was a teenager, he was well known as a master chess player. One Rosh Hashanah afternoon in shul, during a break in the davening, someone approached the young Rabbi Twersky and asked him if he was interested in playing a game of chess. He agreed. His father, the Hornosteipler Rebbe, heard about this and he wanted to rebuke his son for spending such holy time on a frivolous game. Rabbi Twersky was summonsed to his father's study. He stood there, nervously awaiting the rebuke. His father looked up from his desk and just said: "Chess? Is that an appropriate way to spend the holy day of Rosh Hashanah?" Rabbi Twersky got the message loud and clear. But as the boy was leaving his father's study, his father looked up again with a faint smile and a twinkle in his eye and said "But you did checkmate him, didn't you?"*

Let's try something this week:

1. Be aware of times when you need to speak harshly to someone.
2. Make an effort to demonstrate some compassion so as to reduce the pain felt by the recipient.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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<sup>8</sup> The custom is brought by Tosefot in masechet Rosh Hashana 33b, dibbur hamatchil "Shiur".

<sup>9</sup> He was actually beheaded by the very brave Yael – see Judges 4:17-21.

<sup>10</sup> Melachim Bet 6:8-23.

<sup>11</sup> The disciple of Eliyahu HaNavi.

<sup>12</sup> This was the city of Shomron which was the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel at that time.

<sup>13</sup> I am not aware of any other army in history that has acted with such compassion against its enemies!