

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Vayera
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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Vayera – blending in to your surroundings

In this week's Parsha of Vayera, we read about the three angels who visited Avraham while he was recovering from his brit milah. They came to bring Avraham good tidings about the upcoming birth of Yitzchak and to heal Avraham's surgical wound¹. The visit to Avraham was a stopover on the way to Sodom where they would then rescue Lot and his family before destroying Sodom, Gomorrah and the surrounding cities.

The angels had the appearance of men. Despite the fact that he was recovering from his brit, Avraham rushed to welcome the visitors to his home and to prepare a delicious feast. However, a question arises – why did the angels partake of the food when they are spiritual beings and do not need to eat?

In his commentary, Rashi explains that the angels only appeared to eat the food. He then explains that this is the source for the principle that a person should not deviate from the customs of the place in which he finds himself.²

Rashi's comment is based on the Gemara³ where Rabbi Tanchum bar Chanilai teaches that a person should not deviate from the local custom. He provides two sources for this principle. When Moshe ascended Har Sinai to receive the Torah, he *did not* eat bread while he was there because that was not appropriate behaviour up in Heaven. Similarly, the angels who visited Avraham *did* eat bread (or at least they gave impression of eating and drinking) in accordance with the local custom in this world.

According to the Ramban⁴, as soon as he saw them, Avraham immediately recognised that his visitors were actually angels and not men. Yet interestingly, he still offered them a place to rest and a meal because that is the normal way to treat people in this physical world. The Midrash⁵ explains that Avraham understood that when an angel is sent to earth for a mission, he still conducts himself in the manner of human beings.⁶

We can learn from here the importance of derech eretz (the ways of the land) and trying to adopt the local customs and fitting in with one's surroundings.

This issue can arise in the case of people who are visiting a place where the minhag (custom) is different from how they usually behave. For example, consider those who travel from their home town on erev Pesach. Melacha is forbidden from midday on Erev Pesach⁷. However, some places have the

¹ See Rashi's commentary to Breishit 18:1.

² Rashi's commentary to Breishit 18:8.

³ Baba Metzia 86b.

⁴ Ramban's commentary to Breishit 18:3.

⁵ Shemot Rabbah 47:5

⁶ See Ramban's commentary to Breishit 18:3 and also footnote 86 in the Artscroll edition of Ramban's commentary.

⁷ This is not the same as the prohibition to do melacha on Shabbat or Yom Tov. It is equivalent to the prohibition that applies on Chol HaMoed. There are a number of exceptions that apply and one should consult their Rabbi for the parameters.

minhag to refrain from melacha on the morning of Erev Pesach as well. If one has travelled to a place that has a different minhag from their home town, they are faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, they want to behave the way that they usually do and adopt their usual practice. On the other hand, they may not want to cause any tension or dissension by acting in an unusual manner that clashes with the local minhag.

The Shulchan Aruch⁸ rules that a person who normally does melacha on Erev Pesach, who travels to a place that does not do melacha, must refrain from doing melacha because this will cause strife. On the other hand, a person who usually does not do melacha who travels to a place that does do melacha should refrain from doing melacha.⁹ In other words, one needs to take on the stringencies from both the place that he comes from and the place that he is visiting. However, the Shulchan Aruch writes, a person should try not to make it obvious that he is not doing melacha because of the principle “a person should not deviate from the local custom in order to avoid machloket (strife)”.

Thus, it makes sense that a person is instructed to deviate from his usual custom only if his custom is to work and the local custom is not to work. One who works while others are resting stands out more than one who rests while others are working.

A similar issue arises with the question of whether to keep the second day of Yom Tov for people who are travelling between the Eretz Yisrael and the Diaspora. Some opinions hold that visitors to Israel must keep second day Yom Tov but not in an overt manner.¹⁰ Other opinions hold that one follows the local custom in all respects and therefore a visitor to Israel would only keep one day.¹¹ A third approach is that one should keep the second day of Yom Tov in public because it is a well-known phenomenon that those living outside Israel keep 2 days, so this practice will not lead to strife.¹²

We see that there is a delicate balance between keeping one's own customs and acting in a way that that does not cause strife and machloket. This teaches us the importance of balancing our obligations ben Adam l'Makom and ben Adam l'chavero. This is specifically applicable to one who takes on a personal chumrah¹³ of being strict in certain areas. We must strive to ensure that we do not cause any discomfort by our behaviour and the choices that we make, especially when performed in public. If one does so, their loss might actually outweigh the gain that they have from their chumrah.

Let's try something this week:

1. Be aware of how our choices and behaviour can cause others to feel. For instance, remember that taking on extra halachic stringencies may be appropriate to you as an individual and can be very worthy, but you should take into account the effect on your family and community.
2. Remember how admirable it is to be sensitive to the common practice and make an effort to reduce strife.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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⁸ Orach Chaim 468:4.

⁹ There is a discussion about whether one may be lenient in private. Some permit it (e.g. the Mishnah Berurah) while others forbid it (e.g. the Magen Avraham) because people could find out.

¹⁰ This is based on the Mishnah Berurah but it does not appear to be the common custom.

¹¹ This seems to be based on the Chacham Tzvi who holds that to act otherwise would be disrespectful to the Rabbis of that region.

¹² Of course, one who is in this predicament needs to ask their Rav how to behave.

¹³ One acts in a manner that is stricter than technically necessary. Keeping a chumrah can be a very powerful way of improving one's personal avodat Hashem.

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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