

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Yitro
February 2018 / Shvat 5778

darchai.noam@gmail.com
www.divreitorah.net/darchai-noam

How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Yitro – on being humble

In this week's Parsha of Yitro we learn about Moshe's father-in-law, Yitro, joining Bnei Yisrael in the Midbar. Yitro looks on as a long queue of people waits to speak to Moshe and ask him their questions. Yitro doesn't approve of Moshe's system of dispensing justice and offers him some constructive criticism:

“[Yitro] said “What is this thing that you are doing to the people? Why do you sit by yourself, while all the people stand before you from morning to evening? ...The thing you are doing is not good...you will surely wear yourself out, both you and these people who are with you... you cannot do it alone...” (Parshat Yitro, Shmot 18:14-18)

Yitro then offers Moshe the practical suggestion of appointing a system of judges who can preside over the smaller matters. This would free up Moshe to focus on the more difficult and important matters.

It is well known that fathers-in-law always give sensible advice.¹ However, Moshe was the greatest prophet of all time. He was hand-picked by Hashem Himself to lead the nation of Israel out of Mitzrayim and to receive the Torah. Most people in Moshe's position would say something like “Who are you to tell me what to do!?!” However, Moshe in his humility accepted this advice completely and with equanimity:

“Moshe listened to his father-in-law and did all that he said” (Parshat Yitro, Shmot 18:24)

There is a story told of a company that manufactured drinking straws.² Times were tough and the company was struggling financially. Despite the management team's best efforts, nothing seemed to be helping. The CEO called for ideas. An employee who worked on the factory floor mentioned that he had an idea that might help, but no-one took him seriously. Since the highly educated team of management professionals did not know what to do, how could a simple worker know any better? As the company's fortunes continued to decline, and they were about to call in the receivers, a final call for suggestions was issued. The simple worker repeated that he had an idea. In his desperation, the CEO listened receptively. The worker pointed out that the straws were longer than they needed to be. They could be made 1/3 shorter and the customers wouldn't mind at all. They could thereby cut 1/3 of the cost of their raw materials! This brilliant suggestion was implemented, and it literally saved the company from financial ruin.

The question for our purposes is why it took so long for the worker to be heard? Why didn't the CEO and the management team listen to the simple worker at the outset? Perhaps a lack of humility was at play.

Let's suggest a few approaches that might help us to become more humble, like Moshe, and to be less likely to miss valuable advice, like the CEO in our story.

1. Focus on the goal, not on the personal input

Moshe was ultimately focused on the goal – the growth and success of the people of Israel and ensuring that Torah was taught in the most efficient and effective manner possible. Thus, the source of a good suggestion didn't bother him. The idea of appointing the judges was a good one and thus it was worth implementing. The trouble with only respecting certain people, or only listening to those on a higher level, is that we may miss crucial tips from seemingly lesser qualified people. If we focus on the goal and we are not affected or distracted by who contributes what, we will be more likely to benefit from any source. The CEO

¹ Are you reading this, Sam?

² I heard this story from Rabbi Garfunkel.

and the management team wanted to save the company, but perhaps there was also some ego involved – they would have preferred to come up with the idea themselves.

The brilliant physics professor, Gerald Schroeder, has written many books on the reconciliation between science and religion. He travels the world lecturing on this fascinating and controversial topic. In one tour, a young student from Sydney suggested an interesting insight which Professor Schroeder had not considered. Since then, Professor Schroeder is careful to mention this idea in the name of that student. This is a powerful example of the pursuit of truth being more important than ego or demonstrating one's brilliance or experience.

2. Focus on our sphere of influence

Rav Shteinman z"l, who passed away recently, travelled the world while in his 90s to stir up communities and strengthen their observance. He would give multiple lectures in different cities to the point of exhaustion, because he understood that he could make a difference. Hashem gives each of us a sphere of influence. For some of us, our sphere of influence extends to our students or family. For others, our sphere of influence could be just one other person. Or perhaps we need to focus just on ourselves! Sometimes our sphere of influence changes. One day we might be the CEO of a large company with responsibility for the entire organisation. And the next day a simple worker might have an idea that can save the company. If we remember that our ability to influence comes from Hashem, we will be able to appreciate advice and guidance from any source, since it also originally comes from Hashem. Then we will be comfortable with the sphere of influence that Hashem has given us and do the best job that we can in that area. The fact someone else has a different sphere of influence will be less likely to pose a threat.

3. Look up, not around

Let's go back to our Parsha and see how Yitro finished up his advice:

*"If you do this thing, **and [if] the Lord commands you**, you will be able to survive and so will all the people and you will arrive to your place in peace"* (Sefer Yitro, Shmot 18:23)

In effect, Yitro said: "don't take my word for it". Ask Hashem whether he agrees with my idea. Only if Hashem agrees then you should put it into practice.³ If we constantly look up to Hashem as the ultimate authority, then in comparison to Him we are all nullified. The differences between us becomes insignificant.⁴

Humility is a very difficult character trait to achieve. We all have egos. The Chozeh of Lublin explains why Moshe was able to achieve such a high level of humility. Moshe was constantly living in Hashem's Presence. Thus he naturally saw his own stature in comparison to the greatness of Hashem. It is hard to feel pride and arrogance when in the presence of Hashem. With this explanation, the Chozeh of Lublin provides us with some powerful advice on how to overcome the trait of pride and become more humble. Instead of comparing ourselves to the people around us, if we look up to Hashem instead, we won't be lulled into a false sense of gaiva. Remember, the best cure for pride is: look up, don't look around!

Let's try something this week:

Let's focus on our humility this week by trying to put into practice the three lessons discussed above:

1. Focus more on the goal of each project and the benefit for the community, rather than our own personal input.
2. Recognise that Hashem gave us each a specific sphere of influence. Simply focus on doing the best that we can within our own sphere.
3. Remember the best cure for pride – don't compare ourselves to others, rather look up to Hashem.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

³ See Rashi's commentary to this verse. Rashi explains, based on the Mechilta, that Yitro was advising Moshe to consult with Hashem before making any changes.

⁴ In mathematical terms, the difference between 1 and infinity is the same as the difference between 100 and infinity.

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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 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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