

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?

Mishpatim – Lessons from the ox

This week’s Parsha of Mishpatim lists a large number of mitzvot. Let’s focus on one of those mitzvot and explore what lessons we can learn that are relevant to us.

A thief has to repay what they stole and in some circumstances there is an additional fine that is payable. The Torah imposes an additional, special penalty if one steals an ox or a sheep but is not able to return it because it has been slaughtered or sold.

“If a man steals an ox or a sheep and slaughters it or sells it, he shall pay five cattle for the ox or four sheep for the sheep.” (Shmot 21:37).

Thus, in such cases, in addition to repaying the value of the stolen animal, the thief has to pay a fine of four times the value of the ox (for a total of five times the value) or three times the value of the sheep (for a total of four times the value). The Gemara¹ discusses why there is a discrepancy between one who steals an ox and one steals a sheep. Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai explains that when one steals an ox, the ox follows the thief on its own legs without the thief being required to carry it. In contrast, when a thief steals a sheep, he has to pick up the sheep and carry it on his shoulders, thereby suffering embarrassment. This embarrassment is taken into consideration and serves to reduce the severity of the fine.

This is a remarkable idea. The Torah is discussing a thief who has no concern for the property of others. He does not care about other people or causing them suffering and inconvenience. Yet, Hashem is still sensitive to this thief’s feelings! Perhaps we can learn from this how much more we should be sensitive to causing embarrassment to our friends.

Ironically, people may be less sensitive or caring of the feelings of those with whom they are most comfortable. For instance, people often poke fun at their friends in jest. However, even if the friend laughs along, they may in fact feel hurt inside. We need to be very sensitive to this to ensure that we do not cause pain or embarrassment to our friends. The Shulchan Aruch² rules that it is forbidden to call one’s friend by an offensive nickname, even if the friend is accustomed to being called this name. The Gemara³ explains that this is a particularly serious sin and considers it comparable to committing adultery in some respects!

How can we increase our sensitivity to the feelings of others? When we look at others we may see people that are our competitors, people who may have hurt us in the past or people that we don’t really like. It is difficult to change our habits and see these people in a different light.

¹ Baba Kamma 79b.

² Choshen Mishpat 228:5.

³ Baba Metzia 58b.

Rav Avigdor Miller's⁴ teaching may assist us in this regard. Rav Miller put together a list of ten steps to greatness. This is a program comprising ten short actions that one should try to do on a daily basis to help one become a great person.⁵ One of these steps is to actively try to see Hashem in everyone's face. Rav Miller recommends that every day we should look at someone's face (of the same gender) and remind ourselves that we are seeing a 'tzelem Elokim' – an image of G-d. This is based on the principle that man is created in the image of Hashem⁶. Rav Miller teaches that a face is like a screen and a neshama is like a projector that projects onto the face the glory of the human soul. Embedded within the human soul is a spark of the greatness of Hashem.

This is a very powerful technique which may, over time, train us to start treating others with more respect and sensitivity. This can be particularly helpful when we are dealing with people that we struggle to get on with. We should pause before opening our mouths and remind ourselves that the other person is created in the Divine image of Hashem!

The following story provides an extreme example of how one can be being sensitive to the feelings of others, even at great personal expense:

Rabbi Aryeh Levine was known as a saintly individual⁷. He was born in Russia and then lived in Eretz Yisrael until he passed away in 1969. Rabbi Levine was once summonsed to a court case. Someone was claiming that Rabbi Levine had guaranteed a loan and he demanded that the Rabbi repay the loan. As evidence, the man relied on a document that appeared to be signed by Rabbi Levine himself. Rabbi Levine knew that the document was a forgery. Whenever Rabbi Levine signed his name, he was always careful to place a dash between the letters "Yud" and "Heh" of his first name so as to avoid writing part of Hashem's name. There was no such dash on this document. Rabbi Levine realised that the man had forged the Rabbi's signature in a desperate attempt to alleviate his financial difficulties. However, if Rabbi Levine would explain to the court that the signature was a forgery the man would be very embarrassed. Rabbi Levine did not want to cause another person embarrassment. So, remarkably, he kept quiet and agreed to repay the loan. He made repayments every month for a number of years until the loan was fully repaid.

Let's try something this week:

1. Remember the lesson from this week's Parsha – if Hashem recognises the embarrassment of a thief, then surely we can be concerned about reducing the embarrassment of those people closest to us.
2. Try to put Rav Avigdor Miller's suggestion into practice. Once a day, look at the face of another and remind ourselves that we are looking at a tzelem Elokim – an image of Hashem. Remember that embedded within this person is a spark of the Divine.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁴ 1908-2001, a popular rabbi, speaker and author in the United States.

⁵ Google "Rav Miller ten steps" for further details.

⁶ Breishit 1:27.

⁷ This story was published in "A Tzaddik in our Time" by Simcha Raz.

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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