

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Mishpatim
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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Mishpatim – respecting your parents

In this week's Parsha of Mishpatim, we learn many different halachot that pertain to all areas of our lives. Included in this list are some of the most serious crimes that a person can commit. However, interspersed among this list are some crimes that at first glance seem out of place:

*“If a man plots deliberately against his fellow to **murder** him with cunning, [even] from My alter you shall take him to die. “One who **strikes his father or mother** shall surely be put to death. One who **kidnaps** a man and sells him, and he is found to have been in his power shall surely be put to death. One who **curses his father or mother** shall surely be put to death.”* (Sefer Shmot, Parshat Mishpatim 21: 14-17)

We already know from the Ten Commandments that we read last week, the importance of the mitzva of Kibud Av v'Em (honouring and respecting our parents). However, this week's Parsha shows just how important this mitzvah is. Striking or cursing a parent is listed together with the extremely serious crimes of murder and kidnapping and is punishable with the death penalty! Why?

Some commentators have suggested that the relationships that we experience in this world are to teach us how to relate to Hashem.¹ It is difficult to relate to an invisible G-d, Whom we can't comprehend or understand with our limited, finite minds. We can however understand and relate to our relationships in this world. We can use our experience from those relationships and apply them to our relationship with Hashem.

Most people's primary relationship is with their parents. Almost universally, we can relate to the feeling of being a child and having been brought into the world through our parents. And we all have the same ultimate father – our Father in Heaven. As we say in the Avinu Malkeinu prayer – Hashem is firstly our **Father** and then our **King**. This supports the idea that our relationship with our parents teaches us how we should be relating to Hashem.

Other relationships also teach us about Hashem. The story is told of a devout Jew in Russia who was upset when he heard that the wicked Czar had died. He explained that when the Czar was alive, it was possible to understand what it meant to be subservient to a powerful king. This could help people to relate to Hashem as our King. Now that the Czar had died people would not be able to truly appreciate what this means. In countries where there is no king or powerful ruler we can struggle to conjure up the requisite awe and respect for Hashem which we would learn from being the subject of a human king.

Another relationship which teaches us about an aspect of our relationship with Hashem is the relationship between spouses. Shir Hashirim (The Song of Songs), composed by Shlomo Hamelech, describes the relationship between Bnei Yisrael and Hashem in terms of the intimate relationship between a man and wife.

A parent who is blessed with children is provided with a hint of what Hashem must feel, so to speak, when looking down at his children. The love and the pride that parents feel reflects Hashem's love and pride. At times, however, children misbehave and parents feel frustrated. However, when parents consider that often they act the same way towards their Father, it can bring a new perspective to the behaviour of their children.

Our primary relationship with our parents, is the first relationship that we have as a child and is the template for all of our future relationships. If we can learn to treat our parents with respect we can learn how to treat Hashem with respect. If we honour and revere our parents, we can learn how to honour and revere Hashem. If our parents sometimes require us to do things that don't make sense, but we do them anyway, then we can more easily learn how to follow Hashem's chokim (non-rational commandments), simply 'because He said so'.

¹ This is not my original idea. I believe that I first heard this in a shiur from Rabbi Akiva Tatz, but unfortunately I cannot locate the source.

Incidentally, there are other relatives which must also be honoured, although not to the same degree as one's parents. This includes grandparents, in-laws and older siblings.²

We can explore this relationship further from three perspectives – as children, as parents and as children of Hashem.

As children

We should be familiar with the parameters of the mitzvah of respecting our parents so that we can perform this mitzvah correctly. Broadly speaking, there are two aspects to this mitzvah – honouring one's parents (which are the positive acts) and revering our parents (which are the negative acts from which we must refrain).³ Honouring one's parents means caring for their needs, including making sure that they have food and drink and are physically taken care of. Revering one's parents is based on the understanding that parents and children are not equal. Practically, this aspect of the mitzvah includes:

- Not sitting in our parent's chair without permission
- Not directly contradicting anything that our parents say (if we must disagree then we should state it in a respectful manner e.g. "if I'm not mistaken, I understood it differently")
- Never referring to our parents by their first name, even after they have passed away
- Never raising our voice or speaking disrespectfully to our parents
- Standing up when our parent enters the room (this may seem strange in modern society but it is a very appropriate way to demonstrate respect for one's parents)

As parents

What is our responsibility as parents in teaching and commanding respect from our children? This is an important aspect of the child-parent relationship that is often overlooked. Many parents do not feel that they receive the appropriate level of respect from their children. Perhaps parents should ask themselves how much they are themselves responsible for this phenomenon. There are at least two ways that parents might be inadvertently contributing to a lack of respect. Firstly, many adults like to dress down in casual clothes or behave and talk like people who are much younger than they are. How can parents expect their children to respect them if the parents are behaving like their children's equal? We need to remember that there is a healthy gap that should exist between parents and children which should not be minimised. Secondly, parents may neglect to enforce correct behaviour consistently and discipline their children in an appropriate manner for any breach.

Parents must remember though not to command respect to satisfy their own drive for honour. It is all for the benefit of the children. Parents must seek respect from their children in order to train them to do the mitzvah properly, to learn to have respect for authority and ultimately to learn how to respect Hashem.

As children of Hashem

Finally, we can take the lessons that we can learn from the parent-child relationship and apply them to our relationship with Hashem. Just as we have to revere our parents, so too we have to revere Hashem. Just like we can't sit on our parent's chair without permission, we can't use a shule or Bet Midrash for our own purposes. Just like we can't call our parents by their first name, we can't take Hashem's name in vain. And when we look at our children⁴ and notice the childish, immature things that they do, we should reflect on that and realise that we sometimes act the same way towards our Father. We should take this as a reminder to increase our respect for our own parents and our honour and fear of Hashem.

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to brush up on the laws of honouring and respecting our parents, and try to follow these laws!
2. Try to apply our observations and lessons from our relationship with our parents and our children to our relationship with Hashem.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

² As a first-born child I couldn't resist mentioning this one.

³ See Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah Siman 240 and the excellent summary that appears here: <http://www.aish.com/jl/jewish-law/daily-living/8-Honoring-Parents.html>

⁴ Those who are not blessed with children can learn the same lessons by observing nieces, nephews, children of friends etc.

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About Darchai Noam

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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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Many of the ideas that I use in Darchai Noam are based on ideas that I read or heard from various sources. Where possible I try to quote the source. However, in some cases I cannot recall the source. For that I apologise. If I do discuss an idea that I heard from somewhere else, any errors are purely my own.

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