

DARCHAI NOAM**Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם**

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Toldot, October 2013

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How can the Parashah help us grow this week?

Help others to avoid feeling pain and jealousy

In this week's Parasha of Toldot we learn about Yitzchak's experiences in Gerar. There is a famine in the land and Yitzchak plans to go to the land of Mitzrayim like Avraham did. However, Hashem appears to Yitzchak and instructs him to stay in the land of Canaan. Yitzchak therefore remains in Gerar near Avimelech the king of the Philistines. Yitzchak plants his crops like everyone else. It is a tough year with a harsh famine and Yitzchak's land is inferior. However, Hashem blesses Yitzchak with a crop that is 100 times greater than expected. Yitzchak becomes extremely wealthy and the Philistines feel very envious. Eventually, Avimelech asks Yitzchak to leave.

Yitzchak couldn't hide his huge success. His neighbours could see his supernatural crops and the increasing size of his flocks. The Philistines were in the middle of a famine. It pained them to see someone who was so successful and wealthy.

We are all blessed by Hashem in many different ways at different times in our lives. Some of us are blessed with wealth, some of us are blessed with children or health or a successful career. When people less fortunate than us see our blessings they may feel pained and they may also become jealous, thereby contravening the tenth commandment.

One may argue that it is not our fault if our blessings incite others to feel pain or become jealous. If the other person cannot control their feelings of envy then it's their problem. But that is not the correct approach. We must be careful not to cause someone else to sin. All of Bnei Yisrael are responsible for each other (Talmud Shevuot 39a). Furthermore, we are commanded not to place a 'stumbling block before the blind' (Vayikra 19:16).

In an ideal world jealousy would not exist (except for kinat sofrim – or jealousy amongst Torah scholars¹) because we would realise that all of our possessions, our circumstances, and even our problems are tailor made for us.

We have certain things that we need to accomplish in this world and Hashem ensures that we have precisely what we need and what is best for us at any point in time. We don't understand how Hashem works, but if we truly believe in our heart that Hashem is perfectly kind and all powerful then there would be no need to desire what other people have. Imagine a master tailor that crafts a made-to-measure suit that is perfect for your body. Would you then look enviously at someone else's suit that was made-to-measure for their body? Of course not! We would each be happy with our own suit, because it is perfect for us. Hashem works in the same way as the master tailor. There is no need to look at other people's blessings and desire them.

¹ Kinat sofrim refers to being jealous of other people's spiritual accomplishments. This is permitted (and perhaps encouraged) because it can stimulate us to work on ourselves and become better people.

However this is a very difficult level to be on. Even if we understand the idea in our heads, it is very challenging to avoid feeling jealous of other people in our hearts. And if it is difficult for us, then it is likely to be difficult for others as well. In order to treat others like we would like to be treated, and to avoid putting a stumbling block before the blind, we must exercise sensitivity in this regard. Practically speaking, this may involve removing our blessings from the view of other people. The following illustrations are based on true stories:

Scenario 1: David Stein trudges up the stairs to his apartment after a busy day at work. When he passes apartment 3, he notices dozens of balloons and streamers, piles of presents and a big sign saying “Mazal tov, it’s a boy”. “It looks like the Golds finally had that baby” he thinks to himself. David opens the door to his apartment and immediately remembers that he forgot to empty the rubbish bin that morning. He dumps his briefcase near the front door, grabs the bag of rubbish and runs back down the stairs. When he passes apartment 3 again on the way down he can’t help noticing that the area is completely cleared of decorations and presents. He bumps into Jeremy Gold at the bottom of the building and asks him what happened. Jeremy explains that there is a couple in the apartment block that have been married for a number of years but are not yet blessed with children. Jeremy doesn’t want them to feel any pain when they see the balloons and streamers so he brought everything into the apartment as quickly as possible.

Scenario 2: Rabbi Cohen is at a wedding when his mobile phone rings. He glances at the number and then rushes out of the hall. He only answers the phone when he is half way down the street. When he returns, his friend asks him why he took the trouble to go so far away. Rabbi Cohen explains that he was speaking to an older single who is struggling to find a shidduch. He didn’t want her to hear the music from the wedding and perhaps feel envious that someone else has found happiness while she is still searching.

Scenario 3: Mr Levy bumps into his old friend Mr Gold while shopping in the supermarket. “How are your kids”? asks Mr Gold. “Baruch Hashem they’re okay.” answered Mr Levy. The truth is that Mr Levy’s kids are better than okay. Mr Levy is blessed with very successful children who give him a lot of nachos. He is also blessed to have a very close and loving relationship with his children. But Mr Levy knows that Mr Gold is not so lucky. Mr Gold’s children are always getting into trouble and he has a very difficult relationship with them. Mr Levy is bursting to talk about his children, but he sensitively avoids detailing his children’s successes so as not to incite envy or cause pain to his old friend.

Let’s try something this week:

1. Focus on all of our blessings. This can be in many areas of our lives – wealth, health, family, intelligence, career, friends etc.
2. Be aware of the people around us who are not as blessed as we are. Even if they are more blessed than us in some areas, there will almost certainly be at least one area in which we are more blessed than they are.
3. In the presence of those less fortunate than us, be sensitive to how those people might feel when they are exposed to our successes. Perhaps keep our successes out of their sight or avoiding describing them in detail.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Allon Ledder

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About Darchai Noam

The passuk 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'reiacha kamocho' – loving one's fellow as oneself.

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