

DARCHAI NOAM

Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם

(Mishlei 3:17)

Vayikra, March 2015

darchai.noam@gmail.com

How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Vayikra – The greatness of being humble

This week's Parsha starts with the word "Vayikra" – "He called". Hashem calls to Moshe and speaks to him from the Mishkan. Interestingly, the letter aleph in the word "Vayikra" is written smaller than the other letters. Why?

Rashi explains that "Vayikra" with an aleph is an expression of affection. Thus in this case Hashem is calling to Moshe as one friend calls to another. "Vayikar" without an aleph is used when Hashem calls to the wicked Bilaam (Bamidbar 23:4). It is an expression that denotes coincidence and impurity. It implies that Hashem just happened to speak to Bilaam but He did not enjoy meeting with him.

The Ba'al HaTurim explains the story behind the small aleph. In Moshe's great humility, he wanted the first word of the Parsha to be "Vayikar", which was the same term used for Bilaam's prophecies. Hashem commanded Moshe to write in the letter aleph due to the reasons outlined above. Moshe then asked Hashem if he could compromise by writing the letter aleph small.

In last week's Darchai Noam we discussed the fact that Moshe's face was so radiant after he spoke with Hashem that he had to cover it with a mask so that Bnei Yisrael were able to look at him (Shemot 34:33-35). Some commentators have linked Moshe's shining face with the above-mentioned story about the small aleph. The Midrash (Shemot Rabbah 47:6) states that when Moshe finished writing the Torah there was an extra drop of ink left over. Hashem smeared this ink on Moshe's face and that was the source of his radiance. The commentators suggest that this extra drop of ink was left over because this letter aleph was written smaller than normal.

The Torah testifies that Moshe was the most humble person on the face of the earth (Bamidbar 12:3). The Torah also testifies that Moshe was the greatest prophet that ever lived and Hashem spoke to him face to face (Devarim 33:10). Ironically, the source of Moshe's greatness was his humility! By making himself small he became Bnei Yisrael's greatest leader and the person through whom Hashem gave us the Torah.

Rabbi Yaakov Weinberg explained why Moshe's humility made him the perfect choice to receive the Torah¹. To learn from another person, even from Hashem himself, one has to be humble in order to submit to the greater knowledge of the teacher. Otherwise, one will not be able to fully absorb the teachings because there will always be an element of self, a slight feeling of "I know better than them".

Most people enjoy being recognised as great. It makes us feel validated and it satisfies our ego. We are often tempted to highlight our positive attributes in order to help people see us in the most positive light. We feel that we need to make people aware of how great we are. We learn from Moshe though that the opposite is the case. The more humble we are, the more that people recognise our greatness.

There are many teachings that support this view:

- Who is honoured? He who honours others. (Pirkei Avot 4:1)
- Whoever honours the Torah is honoured by others. (Pirkei Avot 4:8)

¹ Heard from Rabbi Yehoshua Berman.

- Those who humble themselves, Hashem raises up and those who raise themselves up, Hashem humbles. Those who chase after greatness, greatness flees from them, and those who flee from greatness, greatness chases after them. (Gemara, Eiruvin 13b)

Honour is a shy creature. If you run after it, it runs away. If you run away from it then it will run after you. But now that we know this we are in a bit of a bind. If we want to be great we need to flee from greatness and make ourselves humble. But does it work if we are doing it for the wrong reason? What if we make ourselves small deliberately so that others should see us as great? This is known as false humility.

The story is told of a man that went to visit his Rabbi with a complaint. "It says in the Gemara that he who flees from greatness, greatness pursues him. Well I've been working very hard to flee from greatness and honour but it isn't working. Why aren't I getting the honour that the Gemara promises me?" His wise Rabbi answered: "That's because you keep on checking over your shoulder to see whether the honour is following you!"

If we want to be great, we need to be **genuinely** humble. It's very difficult to achieve and it requires a life time of work.

There is a similar situation where we might be tempted to act in a certain way but not for a genuine reason. We learn that if you have a certain need, if you pray for your friend who has the same need then you will be answered first. We learn this from the episode of Avraham and Avimelech (Breishit 20:17-21:2). Avraham prayed for Avimelech and his wife and maids. Before curing Avimelech and his household, Hashem first remembered Sarah and she conceived Yitzchak. But does this phenomenon work if we deliberately pray for someone else only in the hope that we will be answered first?

Rabbi Aryeh Levin (1885 -1969) was known as the "Tzaddik of Jerusalem". His whole life was devoted to helping the poor and the sick. He always put the interests of others ahead of his own interests. Towards the end of his life, when his health was failing, he needed to spend time in hospital. While in hospital he was more concerned for the other patients than his own welfare. He would do his best to visit other sick people and spread good cheer. Rabbi Levin said that the hardest part of this time was trying to daven for the other patients' recovery with a full heart. He also needed a recovery and he didn't want his prayers for the other patients to be tainted by his desire for his own recovery and his knowledge that praying for others would help himself.

Admittedly, the ideal is to pray for others solely for their benefit. And to flee from honour because we genuinely feel humble in the presence of Hashem. However we are all humans, not angels. Human beings are complex creatures with mixed motives. Praying for others teaches us to be empathetic and caring. Even if our prayers are not completely pure, we should still pray for our friends anyway and try our best to make those prayers genuine. Similarly, acting in a humble way so that others will see us as great is not ideal. But it's a start.

Over the course of a lifetime we can gently and persistently try to overcome our egos. A good practical way to do this is to constantly remind ourselves that Hashem created us and that everything that we have and are is due only to Him.

Let's try something this week:

1. Notice when we try to build ourselves up, chase honour or inflate our egos. Try to be genuinely humble – not because we want to be great, but because we truly believe that Hashem is in charge, not us.
2. Try to pray for others. And try to be genuine, even if we need the same thing ourselves.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

*** **

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.

If you know someone who might enjoy receiving this email please feel free to pass it on to them or email me their details so I can add them to the subscription list.

You are welcome to use the content of this email in any way that will help to spread the learning of Torah. However please attribute credit appropriately.

How to subscribe or unsubscribe

If you would like to subscribe or unsubscribe to Darchai Noam, please send an email to darchai.noam@gmail.com with the word 'subscribe' or 'unsubscribe' in the subject.