

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Acharai Mot / Kedoshim, May 2017

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Acharai Mot / Kedoshim – the significance of Lashon Hara

This week we read the double portion of Acharei Mot and Kedoshim. Parashat Acharei Mot focuses on the Yom Kippur service carried out by the Kohen Gadol in the times of the Bet Hamikdash. Part of that service took place in the Kodesh HaKedoshim (the Holy of Holies) – the holiest place in the world. It was only once a year, on Yom Kippur, being the holiest day of the year, that the Kohen Gadol was allowed in to the Kodesh HaKedoshim. This was the time that the Kohen Gadol performed the incense service. This service was special and private - no-one else was allowed to be present while the service was conducted.

“Any person shall not be in the Tent of Meeting when he [the Kohen Gadol] comes to provide atonement in the Sanctuary until his departure. He shall atone for himself, for his household and for the entire congregation of Israel.” (Vayikra 16:17)

What form of atonement was achieved by this service? The Gemara¹ explains:

“The academy of R’ Yishmael taught: What does incense atone for? For Lashon Hara. [This is appropriate because] something that is done in secret [i.e. the incense service] should provide atonement for an act that is done in secret [i.e. wicked speech which is generally said in private].”

The Chofetz Chaim teaches us that this service of atonement reveals how serious is the sin of Lashon Hara. The Kohen Gadol is only allowed in to the Kodesh HaKedoshim once a year, and the first thing that he does there is to atone for the sin of Lashon Hara. The Chofetz Chaim explains that this demonstrates that we will not be forgiven for our other sins until we are forgiven for Lashon Hara.

The Chofetz Chaim explains why Lashon Hara is such a serious sin². He explains that people who habitually speak Lashon Hara, and accept as fact the evil talk of others, are corrupting not only their power of speech and hearing, but also their soul in the World to Come. The Torah describes the creation of man as follows: “And Hashem formed man from the dust of the ground, and He blew into his nostrils the soul of life and man became a living being” (Breishit 2:7). Targum Onkelos translates the last phrase as “and man became a speaking spirit”. It is the power of speech that distinguishes us from other creatures. When we misuse our power of speech, we are impairing the very faculty which defines us as human beings.

There is a common misconception that the laws of lashon hara do not apply to information that has become public knowledge. However, this is not strictly correct. The Chofetz Chaim states that we are not free to pass on such information without restriction. There are some conditions that must be met before one passes on public information.

¹ Yoma 44a.

² Based on Artscroll’s “Chofetz Chaim, A Lesson a Day”, p53.

- The person passing on the information must not have the specific intent to spread the story or degrade the person (i.e. the information must be mentioned for another purpose).
- It is only permissible to share the information if it comes up tangentially in the course of conversation.
- One must not add even one word to the story or add one's own weight to support the story's validity by claiming that it's true.
- The listener is not allowed to accept the story as fact.
- One is not allowed to pass on the information if one knows that the listener will accept the information as true and add to the story.
- The Chofetz Chaim advises that even if all of the above conditions are met it is better not to spread public information at all for the sake of one's soul.

This last point highlights that as well as causing damage to the one who is being spoken about and to the listener, speaking lashon hara causes damage to the speaker's soul. Even in cases where speaking lashon hara might technically be permissible, we are advised to avoid gossip and spreading tales. We should rather habituate ourselves to only speaking the opposite of lashon hara – namely, lashon tov.

As well as trying our best to avoid forbidden speech, we should try to change the underlying middot that cause us to stumble in this area. These negative character traits include a lack of sensitivity towards the feelings of others, a desire to look good relative to others and baseless hatred. The Omer period is a very appropriate time for us to focus on these middot. During the Omer period we commemorate the death of Rabbi Akiva's students who died because they did not treat other with respect³.

The following inspiring story⁴ highlights the positive character traits that we should work towards acquiring, to replace the negative middot that lead to Lashon Hara.

One day, Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi was giving a shiur to his students. One of the students had recently eaten garlic and had failed to wash out his mouth. The smell was overpowering and Rabbi Yehuda could not continue the lesson. He asked the offender to please leave the room. One of the best students, Rabbi Chiya stood up and left. All the other disciples then stood up and left the room as well. The following day, Rabbi Yehuda's son asked Rabbi Chiya if he was truly the guilty party. Rabbi Chiya explained that he would never do such a thing. However, he did not want the student who ate the garlic to feel embarrassed. He understood that if he left then others would follow him. The real offender would be able to leave the room but no-one would be able to identify him.

Rabbi Chiya was willing to protect the culprit from shame even at the expense of his own reputation. We learn from this story that it is praiseworthy to do whatever we can to avoid causing shame and embarrassment to another.

Let's try something this week:

1. During the Omer period, and this week in particular, is a good time to brush up on the laws of Lashon Hara!
2. Keep in mind how important it is to avoid causing embarrassment to another.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder.

³ Gemara, Yevamot 62b.

⁴ Gemara, Sanhedrin 11a.

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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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