

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Emor
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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Emor – anti-discrimination

In this week’s Parsha of Emor, we learn that there are a number of physical blemishes that disqualified a Kohen from serving in the Bet Hamikdash. For example, Kohanim who are blind, lame or disfigured, have one limb longer than the other, unusually long eyebrows, an unusual nose or certain skin conditions were all disqualified from service.¹ Though such a Kohen was allowed to eat the meat from the sacrifices, he was not allowed to participate in the performance of the service. If he did perform a sacrifice, that offering must be burnt.²

These halachot may offend our modern sensibilities, being in breach of the principles of equality and equal opportunity. Imagine telling a prospective employee: “I’m sorry that we can’t employ you because you look a bit funny!” You would probably be sued for discrimination!

However, doesn’t this issue of discrimination arise more generally in relation to the fact that Kohanim get to serve in the Bet Hamikdash at all? Non-Kohanim are denied the privilege of serving in the Bet Hamikdash. Kohanim also receive other honours, such as getting called to the Torah first and leading the benching. How is this fair? What about equal opportunity?

Let’s explore this principle of equal opportunity more closely. In reality, people are born with different talents and skills which limit their ultimate status. Though we can learn new skills, we are born with many of our inherent skills and talents. For instance, some people are born more intelligent, or stronger, or more skilful. Some people are more likely to succeed at certain jobs than others. No matter how hard we train, most of us do not have the ability to become an Olympic athlete. Some people are born tone deaf and can never be a successful musician. Some people just don’t have what it takes to succeed at certain jobs. So perhaps the notion of ‘equal opportunity’ is not really so fair after all.

We can’t all be the king, or the Kohen Gadol, or even just a regular Kohen. Hashem determines our circumstances, skills and talents. He also gives us each a unique tafkid – a purpose. He then gives us the tools, resources and abilities that we need to accomplish our task and He judges us on how well we fulfil our potential. Our job is to ask – how can I best serve Hashem in my circumstances? What does Hashem want me

¹ Parshat Emor, Vayikra 21:16-21.

² See Rashi’s commentary on pasuk 23.

to do in my life and in every situation that I find myself? And then try to achieve it to the best of our ability.

If someone is born a Kohen, their job is to be the best Kohen they can be. Similarly, if someone is born as a Levi or Yisrael, then their job is to be the best Levi or Yisrael that they can be. If a Kohen is excluded from service in the Bet Hamikdash due to a blemish, this 'birth defect' comes from Hashem. And He, in His wisdom, has obviously given them another tafkid, a role that is more suitable to their spiritual and physical make-up. Instead of focusing on what they have been denied, it would be more practical and useful to work out what is their own unique job that Hashem wanted them to perform and how they can perform it to the best of their ability.

This is what it means to be a servant of Hashem. A loyal servant does what he is told without questioning his Master. Imagine the servant of a king complaining about his task. "It's not fair, why do you always choose him for the interesting jobs while I just have to work in the royal kitchen peeling potatoes?" A humble servant will simply do what they are told to do, to the best of their ability.

This mindset is also relevant to how we view other people. We might feel that other people are 'below' us or 'above' us. However, in reality this spectrum is irrelevant. If we recognise that each person is a servant of Hashem and contains a Divine spark, we will be less likely to look down on others. There is a well-known test for determining a person's true character. It involves observing how that person treats those people that appear to be 'less important' or people that they don't expect to ever see again. In this way it can be possible to determine whether or not they are a decent person. This test is often used by people who are checking out a potential shidduch. How do they speak to the waiter? How do they treat the check-out person at the supermarket? Are they polite to people even when there is nothing obvious for them to gain by being polite?

When we recall that we are all individuals with different roles serving the same Master, we will be more careful how we treat others. Everyone has their own role given to them by Hashem and everyone is judged only according to their own potential. How are we to know how each person is performing relative to their own personal tafkid and their own potential? For all we know, they could be on a much higher level than us!

By fully internalising this message, we can hopefully reduce the risk of looking down on others or of feeling envious of other people's roles. Rather, we can actively focus on our strengths, and appreciate our own unique task and employ the amazing resources that Hashem has granted us in order to achieve our tafkid.

Let's try something this week:

1. When we interact with others, actively remember that each person has their own unique talents and abilities and their own tafkid from Hashem.
2. Try to focus on serving Hashem in the best way possible, using all of the tools we have been given to maximise our potential.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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About Darchai Noam

Darchai Noam is available online at www.darchai-noam.com. You can access this week's edition of Darchai Noam, archived back issues of Darchai Noam and other divrei Torah.

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, usually 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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