

## DARCHAI NOAM

### Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם

(Mishlei 3:17)

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

### Kedoshim – Everyone is holy after death

This week's Parsha of Kedoshim is read as a separate, stand-alone Parsha. However in many years, Parshat Kedoshim is combined with the previous Parsha, Acharei Mot. When read together, the two Parshiot are known as "Acharei Mot Kedoshim" or "After death, holy".

There is a popular pun based on the names of these two Parshiyot – after death, everyone is holy. When someone has passed on to the next world, people are usually careful to speak only positively about them. In other words, we are more able to achieve the mitzva of judging others favourably in relation to the deceased than the living. Lashon hara (negative speech) is much less common in relation to people that are deceased. We see this even amongst the general population, as illustrated in the following story.

Paul Keating was the Prime Minister of Australia from 1991 to 1996. Mr Keating is known as being very vocal. He does not hesitate to criticise people that he does not agree with, often using very colourful language. One of the frequent critics of Mr Keating and his government was the well know political journalist Padraic (Paddy) McGuinness. Mr McGuinness died of cancer in 2008. The day before Mr McGuinness' funeral, Mr Keating wrote an opinion piece in the national newspaper, The Australian. Mr Keating began the article by stating very clearly that he has a strong policy of never criticising people after they die because they cannot answer back. Mr Keating then said that he had decided to make an exception in this case and he proceeded to criticise Mr McGuinness in very harsh terms, calling him a fraud and a liar.<sup>1</sup>

Putting aside the fact that that Mr Keating chose to ignore his policy in this instance, we see that the principle of holding back criticism of dead people is known amongst the non-Jews as well.

This phenomenon actually accords with halacha too. It is common practice to deliver a hesped (eulogy) at a Jewish funeral. While it is inappropriate to lie, we are encouraged to slightly exaggerate our description of the deceased's good deeds during the hesped<sup>2</sup>. There are a number of explanations for this practice:

- It is forbidden to minimise our description of the deceased's accomplishments. We would rather err on the side of exaggeration than sell the person short.<sup>3</sup>
- We can assume that the deceased performed many good deeds of which we are not aware so we are probably being more accurate if we exaggerate<sup>4</sup>. In fact, during the week of shiva, many mourners learn about great acts of their deceased relative of which they were not previously aware.
- Death atones for many sins. So the deceased person becomes a greater person than people remember them as<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> McGuinness a fraud and a liar, Keating, The Australian, 31 January 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 344:1. The following discussion of the hesped is based on "The Mitzvah of Giving a Proper Hesped", Yeshiva University Torah Online.

<sup>3</sup> The Bach.

<sup>4</sup> Birkei Yosef.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Why are we so careful to speak positively about the deceased? Let's explore some possible reasons. We will see that each of the reasons should really also apply to someone before they die!

### **After death they are no longer a threat**

As competitive beings, many of us tend to view other people as a threat. We presume that their success makes us look bad in comparison. If we cut other people down then we feel taller. Based on this reasoning, people may reduce their lashon hara about the dead because after death they are clearly no longer a competition or a threat to us. Therefore we feel less vulnerable and it is much easier to judge them favourably.

However, we should not view other people as a threat even when they are alive. As we discussed in Darchai Noam a few weeks ago (Parshat Metzora) – Hashem doesn't compare us to other people. He only compares us to our own potential. Instead of focusing on how other people appear, we should focus on building ourselves up and trying to reach our own potential.

### **Feeling sorry for people**

As Paul Keating admitted, when someone has passed away they can no longer answer back. We may therefore feel sorry for them and we are reluctant to criticise them.

However, there are many reasons to feel sorry for people and judge them favourably while they are still alive. We usually have very little idea as to what is going on in another person's inner world.

- Perhaps the person who bumped into you and didn't apologise is distracted because they just lost their job and they don't know how they will make ends meet.
- Perhaps the person who cut in front of you on the road is very stressed because a loved one just received a scary diagnosis.
- Perhaps the person who was rude to you at a social function was very angry because they are in the middle of a major dispute with their child.

Though the above reasons don't excuse the behaviour, they may help us to take pity on others and be less likely to criticise them.

### **A broader perspective**

The death of someone we know often leads us to view life in a broader perspective. We may philosophise about the meaning of life and the fact that we are all mortal. We might ponder about the true purpose of this world as being a place to do mitzvot so that we can earn our eternal reward in the world to come. Such sobering thoughts often deter us from speaking negatively of other people.

However, we should not wait for a tragedy to focus on the meaning of life. As Pirkei Avot advises, we must focus on three things in order to avoid sin: "knowing from where we came; knowing where we will end up (a place of dust, worms and maggots) and knowing before whom we will give justification and reasoning (before Hashem)" (Pirkei Avot 3:1).

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to think of other reasons why we tend to judge the deceased favourably. Then try to think why those reasons should also apply to people that are still alive. Please let me know if you think of any.
2. Let's try to turn "Acharei Mot Kedoshim" into "Lifnei Mot Kedoshim (Before death – holy)". Try to imagine how you would speak about someone after they die. And then judge them in the same favourable manner while they are still alive!

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi 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 parsha 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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