

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Kedoshim – Honesty in business dealings

This week's Parsha of Kedoshim instructs us to be holy like Hashem. Then it lists a plethora of mitzvot. One of these mitzvot is the requirement to have honest weights and measures:

You shall have correct scales, correct weights, a correct ephah [a measure of volume] and a correct hin [another measure of volume], I am Hashem your G-d Who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” (Vayikra 19:36)

This prohibition requires storekeepers to keep accurate scales so that when a customer purchases for example a kilo of apples, they actually receive a full kilo. This mitzva falls within the broader obligation to be honest in our business dealings.

Why does the pasuk refer to Hashem bringing us out of the land of Egypt? The Midrash¹ states that we were brought out of Egypt on condition that we accept this mitzva of honest measures and whoever denies this mitzva denies the redemption from Egypt.

Why does the pasuk include the words “I am Hashem”? Generally, customers do not usually have the ability to check the weights and measures of the storekeeper. They must rely on the storekeeper's honesty. The storekeeper may therefore think that he can get away with inaccurate scales because no-one is watching. This sin reveals not only a dishonesty to ones fellow man but also a failure to believe that Hashem is always watching. Perhaps the pasuk mentions Hashem to remind us that Hashem is present and to deter storekeepers from committing this sin.

In Mesillat Yesharim, the Ramchal discusses similar types of sins that appear to be hidden. Other people may be unaware and thus it may be more tempting to commit such sins.² He notes that it is so easy for a person to deceive himself with regards to these sins and fall prey to sin. Most people are not overt thieves, however many people are tainted by theft in the course of their business dealings by allowing themselves to gain through their neighbours' loss, saying “business is different”. However the Ramchal states that any form of deceit in business dealings is forbidden. He quotes the Gemara³ stating that the punishment for dishonest weights and measures is more severe than the punishment for illicit relations. The Gemara explains that it is practically impossible to find all of the members of the public that have been defrauded. Therefore complete repentance is almost impossible.

The Ramchal also brings the following pasuk which describes people who have dishonest measures:

“You shall have a full and honest weight and a full and honest ephah measure...for whoever perpetrates such injustice, is an abomination to Hashem your G-d.” (Devarim 25:15-16)

The following stories relate to this area of honest business relations.

A story is told of when the Chofetz Chaim hired a wagon. The wagon driver set off through the countryside. At one point the wagon driver pulled over and asked his passenger to please wait for a moment. He had noticed a wheat field with an abundance of wheat. “I'm sure the owner won't mind if I

¹ Sifra.

² In the beginning of Chapter 11.

³ Baba Batra 88b.

just take a bundle or two for myself". As the wagon driver crept up to the field the Chofetz Chaim shouted "Quick! Someone is watching!" The wagon driver sprinted back to the wagon and drove off in a rush. But as the wagon pulled away from the field, the wagon driver noticed that no-one else was around. "Why did you tell me that someone is watching?" he asked. "Someone is always watching", replied the Chofetz Chaim. "Hashem is always watching".

Another story is told⁴ of a dreadful smallpox epidemic in the Jewish ghetto of Krakow about 300 years ago. The elders of the community decided to make a "dream query" – a kabbalistic request for Heavenly information that is provided through the medium of a dream. The answer was that Shlomo the butcher should lead the prayers in front of the entire community. The elders went to visit Shlomo and asked him to come to the shule. Shlomo was embarrassed, he couldn't even read properly. Shlomo stood on the bimah, nervous, and then suddenly ran away from the shule. He returned a few minutes later with a wheelbarrow containing his butcher scales. With tears in his eyes he said "Here G-d, take the scales, that must be why you wanted me to lead the prayers, right? So take the scales and just heal the children!" That evening the children started to heal. The elders wondered what was so special about Shlomo's scales. On investigation they discovered that all of the other scales in the ghetto were slightly inaccurate and were only checked occasionally. In contrast, Shlomo carefully checked his scales twice a day. When asked why, he stated simply "That's what G-d wants". According to the legend, these scales were on display in the Krakow synagogue until they were destroyed during World War II.

The story is brought in the Gemara⁵ of Abba Shaul ben Botnit who was very particular about accurately measuring wine for his customers. The customers did not want to wait for the froth that was left over in the measuring cups to settle. However Abba Shaul felt that the froth did not belong to him so he collected it and eventually accumulated 300 jugs of wine. His colleague R. Elazar ben R Tzadok had a similar problem with the oil that he sold. The customers did not want to wait for every single drop to pour from the measuring cups into their bottles. R. Elazar was also reluctant to keep these last few drops for himself. He collected them and found that he had 300 jugs of oil. The two men brought these jars to the Bet Hamikdash. The Sages told them they according to the law they could keep the wine and oil because the customers didn't want to wait and so they had renounced all claims. However the two men did not want any part of something that did not clearly belong to them. They were advised to donate the oil and wine to projects that benefited the community.

This requirement for honest business dealings extends well beyond overt dishonesty. Many of us are guilty of similar seemingly small acts of inappropriate behaviour that other people do not notice – such as using office supplies for personal use, making long distance calls from the office phone without permission and spending time for which we are paid a salary on personal matters. However any such cheating reflects the same fundamental flaws in our avodat Hashem - a lack of yirat Hashem. In effect we are placing fear of man over fear of Hashem.

Let's end with a joke. A teacher called in a boy's parents for a talk. The boy had a bad habit of stealing pencils from his classmates. "I don't understand why he is doing this" said the father. "I bring home more than enough pencils from the office for him to use."

Let's try something this week:

1. Let's focus on our honesty in our business dealings, particularly on those seemingly insignificant things that escape other people's attention.
2. Cheating is most tempting when other people are unaware. Let's try to remember that Hashem is always watching us.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

⁴ Seen in the Lamplighter, 19 February 2016.

⁵ Beitza 29a.

Note: as the majority of our readers are located outside of Eretz Yisrael we will be following the calendar of Parshiyot for Chutz L'Aretz.

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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're'echa kamocho' – loving one's fellow as oneself.

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