

## DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

### “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Kedoshim (Vayikra 19:1–20:27)  
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How can the Parasha 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.

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>1</sup>. There are a number of explanations for this practice:

- It is forbidden to minimise our description of the deceased’s accomplishments. Since it is impossible to be 100% accurate in our description, we would rather err on the side of exaggeration than “sell the person short”.<sup>2</sup>
- The deceased probably performed many good deeds which we do not know about. In fact, during the week of shiva, it is common for the mourners to be told about great acts of their deceased relative of which they were not previously aware.<sup>3</sup>
- Death atones for many sins. So the deceased person actually becomes a greater person than they were while they were alive.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, many of us are naturally careful to speak positively about the deceased even without being aware of this halacha. Let’s explore some possible reasons why we naturally tend to do this. We will then discover that each of these 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, even subconsciously. We presume that their success makes us look bad in comparison. In response to this, we may subconsciously cut other people down in order to feel taller. However, after a person dies they are no longer viewed as a threat. Thus, people may automatically find less reason to speak lashon hara about the dead and cut them down because they are clearly no longer competition or a threat to us. Thus, kind and positive words are easier to utter.

However, in reality we should not view other people as a threat even when they are alive. As discussed in Darchai Noam a few weeks ago (Parshat Metzora) – Hashem does not compare us to other people. He

<sup>1</sup> Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 344:1. The following discussion of the hesped is based on “The Mitzvah of Giving a Proper Hesped”, by Rabbi Aryeh Lebowitz, Yeshiva University Torah Online (<https://download.yutorah.org/2008/1109/729071.doc>).

<sup>2</sup> The Bach on Yoreh Deah 344.

<sup>3</sup> Birkei Yosef on Yoreh Deah 344.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

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**

When someone has passed away, it may bring out our compassion and sympathy for them and their families. When we feel sorry for someone we are much less likely to criticise them.

However, there are many reasons to feel sorry for people and judge them favourably while they are still alive. This requires us to exercise our middot of being compassionate and judging others favourably. 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 feeling angry because they are in the middle of a painful 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 speak negatively about them.

### **Fear and awe**

We may realise that the person who has passed away is now in the world of truth. Our fear and awe of that place may subconsciously make us more careful of our words (and even our thoughts).

However, we should ideally always be aware of the world of truth. Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi teaches that we should contemplate three things to avoid sin – there is an eye that sees what we do, an ear that hears what we say, and all of our deeds are inscribed in a book.<sup>5</sup>

### **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 and philosophising may deter us from speaking negatively about others. Our pettiness and jealousy fades in the face of truth. Life is too short!

However, we should not wait for a death to focus on the meaning of life. As Akavia ben Mahalalel advises, we should 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)"<sup>6</sup>. These thoughts should be in our mind at all times, and not just when we think about a person who has passed away. That way we will be more likely to speak positively and avoid speaking negatively about others while they are alive.

Let's try something this week:

1. Consider why we tend to judge the deceased more favourably and speak positively about them. 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 additional reasons.)
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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<sup>5</sup> Pirkai Avot 2:1

<sup>6</sup> Pirkai Avot 3:1