

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Bechukotai, June 2016

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Bechukotai – the intrinsic value of every human being

This week’s Parsha of Bechukotai contains the tochacha – the terrible list of curses that are inflicted on the Jewish people when they do not live up their obligations as Hashem’s Chosen People. Immediately following this section is the portion dealing with Arachin (valuations). If someone wished to donate the ‘value’ of a person to the Beit Hamikdash, the Torah prescribes the amount that is to be donated. It is a fixed value based on gender and age. There is no variability with regard to other factors such as a person’s earning capacity or commercial value.

Why is this portion of Arachin placed straight after the Tochacha? The Kotzker Rebbe¹ explains that after we read the list of curses the Jewish people may begin to lose faith in themselves and their self-worth. They may feel depressed after realising how many of the curses have already come into fruition, or they may be fearful of the future. This passage dealing with Arachin reassures us that we all have an intrinsic, eternal value in the eyes of Hashem.² This powerful message can serve to help all of us through difficult times.

It is important to note that the Torah prescribes a fixed value to human beings. If one were to be asked to calculate the value of another human being, we might assign a different value based on what is important to us. Some people might choose financial worth. For instance, in the “Top 200 Rich List” financial journalists try to estimate the net worth of the nation’s richest people.

This raises the question - is Bill Gates worth more than a simple beggar? What about someone that can offer an important contribution to society? Is a scientist who is about to discover a cure for cancer of more value than a thief? What about a Torah scholar compared to a hedonist? An elderly patient compared to a young baby?

Hospitals and governments have to frequently make such difficult decisions about prioritising life when they allocate scarce resources. If a hospital can only perform one life saving operation at a time, and they are presented with two patients that need the same operation, who will they choose? Hospital ethics committees regularly grapple with these difficult and painful decisions. However, apart from such unique situations, it is not our role to measure another person’s worth and apportion varying values to people.

The portion of Arachin teaches us that Hashem does not assign variable values to different people in this manner. Rather, the Torah sets fixed values for all humans. Any two people that are the same gender and in the same age category will have the same value. This

¹ Rabbi Menachem Mendel Morgensztern of Kotzk (1787–1859).

² Seen in “The Parsha Potpourri” by Rabbi Ozer Alport.

demonstrates that we are all equally valid and valuable, we all contain a spark of Hashem and we all have unlimited potential.

It is strictly forbidden to take any action that can shorten someone's life, even if that person is a 'gossess' (someone that is very close to death). Any action taken to hasten their death is considered murder³. Hashem values every moment of life. It is impossible for us to ascribe an accurate value to someone's life.

The following story⁴ highlights how outward appearances are in no way representative of a person's value and how dangerous it can be to presume another's worth. The famous Rabbi Aryeh Levine, known to be a saintly individual, used to walk past a particular elderly beggar on his way home every day. He made it a practice to give the beggar a regular donation. One day, after this had continued for some time, the beggar asked Rabbi Levine to follow him to a secluded hovel in a remote part of the neighbourhood. Rabbi Levine then witnessed an amazing sight. Apparently, the beggar had been leading a daily learning session in a very esoteric and difficult book of kabbalah and the secret group had finally reached the end of the sefer. Rabbi Levine was privileged to join them for the siyum. The beggar passed away very soon after the siyum. Apparently his job in this world was finally complete. Many people would have presumed that he was just a simple beggar and not guessed that he was actually a hidden tzaddik.

The above story highlights that as mere mortals with limited vision and understanding, we have no way of knowing a person's true worth or how much they still have left to contribute to this world. Each of us has our own unique challenges and our own unique tefikd or purpose in life. Hashem judges us by how we measure up compared to our own potential. But in prescribing the same value to each person, the Torah is teaching us that it is not for us to measure or apportion value to another human being. That is not our role. We each have value and everyone's life is infinitely precious.

Let's try something this week:

1. Notice if we are judging or comparing people. Do we make assumptions about other people's worth? We can strive to catch ourselves in the act of comparing or valuing and then remind ourselves that this is Hashem's role, not ours.
2. If we are going through a difficult time in our lives, and our feeling of self-worth is taking a beating, remember the teaching of the Kotzker Rebbe. We each have an eternal, intrinsic value in the eyes of Hashem.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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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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³ Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 339:1.

⁴ This story was published in "A Tzaddik in our Time" by Simcha Raz.

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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