

DARCHAI NOAM

Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם

(Mishlei 3:17)

Balak, July 2015

darchai.noam@gmail.com

How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Balak – respecting people’s privacy

In this week’s Parsha of Balak, we read about the attempts by the wicked Bilaam to curse Bnei Yisrael. Hashem did not allow him to curse and instead turned his words into blessings.

After two unsuccessful attempts at cursing Bnei Yisrael through the use of divinations, Bilaam tries a different approach. He turns towards the wilderness so as to open himself up to Hashem’s prophecy in order to bless Bnei Yisrael.¹ However, according to Rashi, Bilaam still retained malice towards Bnei Yisrael at this time. He looked towards the wilderness to allude to the sin of the Golden Calf, which took place in the wilderness. Bilaam’s blessing begins with the following:

“Mah Tovv Ohalecha Yaakov - How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel.” (Bamidbar 24:5)

This beautiful and famous verse is included at the beginning of our daily prayers. It is ironic that it was uttered by an enemy of Israel.

What did Bilaam see that prompted him to recite this praise of Bnei Yisrael? The pasuk says that he saw Israel dwelling according to its tribes. Rashi explains that Bilaam was struck by the order of the camp. The tribes maintained their separate identities with each tribe camped in a separate location. Bilaam also saw that the tents were arranged in such a way that their doors did not face each other, preventing people from intruding on each other’s privacy. The fact that the tribes camped together showed that they felt responsible for each other. Yet on the other hand, their arrangement revealed that they respected each other’s privacy.

Everyone needs a certain basic level of privacy. We must respect that. Beyond that, some people prefer more privacy (introverts) while other people are more comfortable in social settings (extroverts).

The psychologist Carl Jung created the classifications of “introvert” and “extrovert”, and the concept of psychological types. Jung explained that introverts are more energised by their internal world whereas extroverts are more energised by the external world. Jung also taught that people are not purely introverted or purely extroverted. Everyone has a bit of both types in varying proportions.

Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk taught a novel idea regarding the distinction between Shabbat and Yom Tov². He explains that Shabbat caters to the introvert part of us while Yom Tov is the time when we express the extrovert part of us. His distinction is supported by the following evidence:

- Shabbat was sanctified by Hashem at the beginning of time before the world was fully populated. In contrast, Yom Tov did not begin until the Jewish people existed. Yom Tov is sanctified by a human court and its very existence depends upon other human beings. (See Darchai Noam, Parshat Bo, January 2015 for more on this idea.)

¹ Ramban on Bamidbar 24:1.

² Based on an article by Rabbi Dr Tzvi Hersh Weinreb, Parshat Emor 5775, published in the OU’s Torah Tidbits.

- On Shabbat there is a distinction between ‘public’ and ‘private’ domains and we cannot carry things in the public domain. On Yom Tov the distinction between private and public domains disappears and we can carry things in the public domain.
- On Shabbat cooking for guests is forbidden. Whatever is cooked before Shabbat begins is what we have. On Yom Tov entertaining guests is so important that we are allowed to cook food even late in the day in case guests may arrive.
- The main emotions of Shabbat are kavod (dignity) and oneg (delight) which can be experienced alone. On Yom Tov we focus on simcha (joy) – an emotion that is best experienced with others.

As Jung explains, humans are complex creatures. We have aspects of introversion and extroversion. That is why we all need Shabbat and Yom Tov – different times for different aspects of our personalities.

There are a number of psychological tools that are used to classify people according to personality type. One of the more well-known tools, based on Jung’s theory mentioned above, is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). People are measured in each of 4 areas:

- Favourite world – do you prefer to focus on the outer world (extrovert) or your own inner world (Introvert).
- Information – do you prefer to rely on your senses or your intuition.
- Decisions – are you a thinking person (you prefer to use logic) or a feeling person (you look at the people and the circumstances).
- Structure – do you prefer to get things decided or do you prefer to stay open to new information and options.

MBTI is a very powerful tool to explain why people act the way they do and how they make decisions. As well as providing enormous insight into our own character, it helps us to understand each other and how to interact with each other more successfully. For example, if you are passing on information to a person that is more of a feeling person than a thinking person, then you should focus more on describing the people than discussing the facts.

The more that we understand about each other’s personalities, the better we can be at our inter-personal interactions. We don’t need to do a psychological test like MBTI, we just need to pay attention to the needs and preferences of others. For example, if a person is sad they may prefer to be left alone. Another sad person may crave company. Though it takes a bit of effort, we can often work it out.

If we understand each other’s needs we can treat each person the way that they prefer to be treated. As Bilaam noticed, everyone needs a basic level of privacy. Beyond that basic level, people’s needs for privacy change, depending on the psychological make-up of the person and also the circumstances. Our job is to be in tune with those needs so that we can treat each person appropriately without having to be asked.

Let’s try something this week:

1. Try to work out when people need space and when they need company.
2. Remember – people’s needs for privacy may change over time and may change based on circumstances.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

*** **

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 that usually relates 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.

If you know someone who might enjoy receiving this email please feel free to pass it on to them or email me their details so I can add them to the subscription list.

You are welcome to use the content of this email in any way that will help to spread the learning of Torah. However please attribute credit appropriately.

How to subscribe or unsubscribe

If you would like to subscribe or unsubscribe to Darchai Noam, please send an email to darchai.noam@gmail.com with the word 'subscribe' or 'unsubscribe' in the subject.