

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Balak, July 2016

www.divreitorah.net/darchai-noam

darchai.noam@gmail.com

How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Balak – hidden favours

Think about it. If you do a favour for a friend, is it better to tell them or to keep it a secret?

In this week's Parsha of Balak, we read about the attempts of Bilaam to curse Bnei Yisrael. Bilaam was a powerful sorcerer whose curses caused the downfall of entire nations. Balak, the king of Moab, hired Bilaam to help Moav dispose of Bnei Yisrael. However, despite numerous attempts, Hashem did not allow Bilaam to curse Bnei Yisrael. Each time Bilaam opened his mouth beautiful verses of praise and blessing emanated from him. We even include some of these blessings in our daily prayers¹.

During this entire episode Bnei Yisrael remain in the background, totally oblivious to the miraculous manner in which Hashem is saving his beloved people. If Hashem did not add this story to the Torah then we would probably never have found out what happened! It seems that Hashem wanted us to know.

A similar theme occurred in last week's Parsha of Chukat. Shortly before the war with Sichon, the king of the Emorites, Bnei Yisrael sang a song of thanks and praise to Hashem and the miraculous well of water that followed them in the desert². It seems strange that the song is sung at this point when the well has been with them for the past 40 years. The Midrash explains that the Emorites had planned a deadly ambush. Bnei Yisrael were passing through a deep gorge. The Emorites hid in caves at the top of the gorge, planning to throw large boulders onto the heads of Bnei Yisrael as they passed. However, Hashem caused the two walls of the gorge to miraculously move together, crushing the Emorites to death. Bnei Yisrael remained ignorant of this miracle until Hashem caused the blood of the Emorites to flow down the gorge and into the well of water that followed Bnei Yisrael. Upon realising Hashem's kindness, Bnei Yisrael burst into a song of gratitude.

There is a psychological principle known as reciprocity³. People generally do not like to feel indebted to others. If someone does us a favour, we naturally feel compelled to do them a favour back. For instance, if someone invites us for a Shabbat meal then we feel a sense of duty to invite them back because “we owe them”. Successful marketers often rely on this principle to encourage people to buy their product. If you receive a “free gift”, you are more likely to buy the product / give a donation / become a subscriber, out of a sense of reciprocity.

We can channel this natural principle of reciprocity for the good. If people do acts of goodness and kindness to us, this feeling of ‘owing’ another may encourage us to similarly respond in kind. This can increase the level of unity and brotherly love. One of the reasons given for the mitzvah of mishloach manot on Purim is that it increases peace and brotherly love. When we receive mishloach manot from a friend we often feel obligated to reciprocate. We have probably all

¹ “Mah Tovv Ohalecha Yaacov...” (Bamidbar 24:5), see page 12 of the standard Artscroll Ashkenaz siddur.

² Bamidbar 21:17-20.

³ “Influence – The Psychology of Persuasion” by Robert Cialdini, 1984.

witnessed the resulting camaraderie (not to mention chaos!) from this heated and loving exchange on Purim.

Perhaps this aspect of human nature explains why Hashem informed us about the stories of Bilaam and the Emorites. When we hear about the kindnesses that Hashem did for us, we feel His love more strongly and we have a stronger incentive to “pay Hashem back” through Torah learning and mitzvot.

Similarly, we can learn from this the benefits of telling another person when we perform a kindness for them because it can add to their feeling of goodwill.

However, on the other hand, there may be drawbacks to sharing our act of chesed. There are other factors that need to be taken into account before deciding to inform the recipient of the kindness that was done for them. In particular:

- If the recipient found out that an act of kindness was done for them, it may cause them to feel indebted or embarrassed, especially if they cannot repay the favour; and
- If we inform the recipient about the act of kindness, it may cause us to feel gai'va (arrogance).

The above is relevant for mitzvot ben Adam l'Chavero (mitzvot between people). The advantage of encouraging others to reciprocate with chesed does not seem to apply to mitzvot ben Adam l'Makom (between people and Hashem). Other people will not feel a lack of reciprocity when we tell them about a mitzvah we are doing for Hashem. So the question becomes whether we should share such mitzvot with others or keep them hidden.

On the one hand, keeping these mitzvot quiet can help to increase our anava (humility). On the other hand, publicising the mitzvah may encourage others to replicate the behaviour, or provide chizuk to other people. This principle underlies the reason why Jewish tradition encourages the use of plaques to commemorate the people who generously donate towards the cost of building our communal facilities. “This chair was proudly donated by...”. “This window was donated in loving memory of...”. It may seem ostentatious to do this and yet these plaques are beneficial in motivating others to be equally generous.

Let's try something this week:

1. Be aware of when our good deeds are hidden and when they are revealed. If they are hidden, we can consciously struggle with whether it is better to keep quiet or to publicise our acts in each case.
2. We can consider the following relevant factors in order to make a good decision:
 - for mitzvot ben Adam l'Chavero: encouraging gratitude and reciprocity vs embarrassment and feelings of gai'va;
 - for mitzvot ben Adam l'Makom: encouraging the spiritual growth of others vs feelings of gai'va.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

Darchai Noam is now available online at www.divreitorah.net/darchai-noam. You can access this week's edition of Darchai Noam, archived back issues of Darchai Noam and other divrei Torah.

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

*** **

About Darchai Noam

The pasuk 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.

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.

Many of the ideas that I use in Darchai Noam are based on ideas that I read or heard from various sources. Where possible I try to quote the source. However in some cases I cannot recall the source. For that I apologise. If I do discuss an idea that I heard from somewhere else, any errors are purely my own.

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.