

## 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?

### Balak – the art of listening

In this week’s Parsha of Balak, we read about the famous story of Bilaam and his unsuccessful attempts to curse Bnei Yisrael. Hashem literally puts words into Bilaam’s mouth, forcing him to recite beautiful words of praise about Bnei Yisrael.

Hashem communicates with Bilaam on a number of occasions in this story. During the course of Hashem’s interactions with Bilaam, Hashem appears to change His mind a number of times. At the beginning of the Parsha, Balak the king of Moab sends a delegation to Bilaam to ask for his assistance in dealing with the ‘Jewish problem’. Hashem appears to Bilaam at night and tells him not to go. Balak continues to send higher ranking officers, offering more and more remuneration. However, Hashem’s response is the same. Eventually, Hashem agrees to allow Bilaam to go but He instructs Bilaam that he is only allowed to bless the Jewish people. But then, Hashem becomes angry at the fact that Bilaam is going<sup>1</sup> and He sends an angel three times to stop Bilaam. The angel eventually allows Bilaam to continue on the journey but only after reminding him that he is only permitted to say what Hashem instructs him to say, that is, words of blessing and not words of curse.

So does Hashem want Bilaam to go or not? Since Hashem is perfect and unchanging, vacillation and indecisiveness does not seem like Divine characteristics. How can we make sense of Hashem’s interactions with Bilaam?

Perhaps we can explain this incident through the means of a parable<sup>2</sup>:

*Reuven was a teenager who just got his driving licence. He asked his father Shimon if he could borrow the car. Shimon understood that teenagers can be somewhat less than mature at times so he refused the request. After repeated requests and offers to do chores around the house, Shimon finally agreed, but only with certain conditions: absolutely no alcohol, all passengers must wear seat belts and Reuven must be home by 11:00pm at the latest. Reuven jumped for joy and ran off to call his friends. Shimon was concerned that Reuven heard the “yes” but didn’t hear the “but”. So when it came time to go, Shimon took the keys and placed them safely in his own pocket. When Reuven protested, his father told him to sit down, calm down and listen very carefully to the conditions. When Shimon was sure that Reuven understood the importance of the conditions, he finally handed over the keys.*

It seems that Hashem was always prepared to allow Bilaam to go, but only if he agreed to the condition that he could only bless Bnei Yisrael. Hashem could see into Bilaam’s heart and He knew how eager Bilaam was to curse Bnei Yisrael. So Hashem was making sure that Bilaam was listening carefully and internalising the condition upon which he could go on the journey.

This teaches us the importance of listening when others are speaking to us. Listening is a very important, but difficult skill to master. People generally want to feel heard. The mere fact that

<sup>1</sup> Bamidbar 22:22.

<sup>2</sup> Based on an idea that I heard from Rabbi Jonathan Snowbell from Yeshivat Har Etzion.

someone is really listening can help them feel validated, unburdened and accepted. Listening to someone can be a great act of kindness. In addition, the simple act of really listening can help to calm someone's anger and defuse a potentially volatile situation. In contrast, feeling that one is not being heard is frustrating and can cause resentment.

Listening without judgement is an example of the middah of 'hod' or submission. Listening allows us to really understand the other person's perspective.

Here are some tips to help us to improve our listening skills:

- Maintain eye contact.
- Use some 'encouragers' – sounds and gestures that indicate that you are paying attention.
- Summarise and repeat back to the speaker what they have said to demonstrate that you heard them and you understand.
- If anything is unclear, ask for clarification.
- Try to avoid thinking about your own response while the other person is talking.

The main facet of listening is to focus on the other person, not ourselves. Our job is to use our ears and to give the other person an empathetic reception.

The following story is told about the great Rebbi (R' Yehuda HaNasi, the redactor of the Mishnah):<sup>3</sup>

*One day a calf that was on its way to being slaughtered escaped and ran, weeping to Rebbi. Rebbi instructed the calf to go back to the slaughter house because that was the reason for which it was created. As a result of this incident Rebbi was punished with 13 years of physical suffering. The pain only stopped when Rebbi had mercy on some weasels in his house and instructed his maidservant not to hit them with a broom.*

What did Rebbi do wrong? He was only telling the calf the truth. However, perhaps on his high level, Rebbi was expected to have more empathy when listening to the calf. Though R' Yehuda HaNasi heard the calf's complaint, we can suggest that he didn't really listen. He didn't fully empathise. He didn't feel the pain. Thus he was punished for this indiscretion.

We are coming up to the three weeks. It is an appropriate time to remember that the second Bet Hamikdash was destroyed due to baseless hatred. The remedy for this sin is to increase our love for each other. One way we can do this is to learn from Bilaam and from the story of Rebbi Yehuda HaNasi and focus on becoming better listeners.

Let's try something this week:

1. Improve our listening skills by practising some of the tips mentioned above.
2. When listening to another, remind ourselves that this is the time to be open and receptive and empathetic.
3. When we are listening, remember: it's not about us... it's about the other person!

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Ledder.

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<sup>3</sup> Gemara, Baba Metzia 85a.

## **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.

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