

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Balak
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How can the Parasha 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 the people and He turned Bilaam’s 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 attempted curse is again transformed into words of blessing and he begins with the following:

“Mah Tovu 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. Rashi² 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. Rashi adds that Bilaam also saw that the tents were arranged in such a way that their doors did not face each other. The fact that the tribes camped together showed that they felt responsible for each other. Yet on the other hand, the arrangement of their tents revealed that they respected each other’s privacy.

The concept of privacy is revealed in the important Jewish principle of tzniut. Tzniut is more than just wearing modest clothing. Tzniut is a whole approach to life that applies to both men and women. For example, the Gemara³ praises King Saul for his high level of modesty when he needed to go to the bathroom during a battle. He took extreme measures to ensure his privacy, covering himself with a garment even though he was hidden away in a cave that was within another cave.

We also learn the significance of privacy from Moshe’s sin when he hit the rock in Parashat Chukat. According to some opinions, Moshe’s sin was the fact that he spoke angrily at Bnei Yisrael when he said “Listen now you rebels”. The Midrash Rabbah asks why Moshe was only punished at this point when he had previously said something that was even worse. When Bnei Yisrael complained about the lack of meat, Moshe said “Can sheep and cattle be slaughtered for them and suffice for them? Or if all the fish of the sea will be gathered for them, would it suffice for them?”⁴ The Midrash explains that the first offence was a private matter between Moshe and Hashem. However this matter in Parashat Chukat was done in public and therefore could not be overlooked.

¹ Ramban on Bamidbar 24:1.

² See Rashi’s commentary to Bamidbar 24:2, which is based on the Gemara Baba Batra 60a.

³ Brachot 62b.

⁴ Parashat Beha’alotcha, Bamidbar 11:21.

Everyone needs a certain basic level of privacy. However, some people prefer more privacy (i.e. introverts) while other people are more comfortable in social settings (i.e. 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 Tov⁵. He explained 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.
- 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.

We all have aspects of introversion and extroversion. That is why we all need Shabbat and Yom Tov – different times for different aspects of our personalities.

Even the most extroverted extrovert would like some parts of his day or life to remain private. As Bilaam noticed, everyone needs a basic level of privacy. Beyond that basic level, a person’s need for privacy changes, 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.

The more that we understand each other’s personalities, the better we can judge the degree to which another person needs privacy. For example, if one person is sad, they may prefer to be left alone. However, another sad person may crave company. Though it takes a bit of effort, we can often work out what is most appropriate for each person that we deal with.

Let’s try something this week:

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

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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⁵ Based on an article by Rabbi Dr Tzvi Hersh Weinreb, Parshat Emor 5775, published in the OU’s Torah Tidbits.