

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Chukat
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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Chukat – being sensitive to others

In this week's Parsha of Chukat we read about Moshe's various attempts to gain permission to pass through other nation's lands on the way to Eretz Yisrael. Moshe sent emissaries to the king of Edom (a descendant of Eisav) and the king of the Amorites asking for the right to pass through in a peaceful manner. These requests were all denied. Unfortunately, times have not changed much – the other nations are not in a rush to help us!

Moshe sent messengers from Kadesh to the king of Edom: “So says your brother, Israel, ‘You know all the hardship that has befallen us...now we are in Kadesh, a city on the edge of your border. Please let us pass through your land; we will not pass through fields or vineyards, nor will we drink well water. We will walk along the king's road, and we will not turn to the right or the left until we have passed through your territory.

Edom replied to him, “You shall not pass through me, lest I go out toward you with the sword”.
(Bamidbar 20:14-18)¹

Moshe then tried again, offering to pay for all the water that the people would drink (even though Bnei Yisrael were accompanied by the miraculous well of Miriam and did not need to buy water). Yet again, Edom denied the request, even though it was in their economic interest to agree.²

In his commentary on the Torah, the Ramban points out the contrast between Moshe's words to Edom and the message that he sent to Sichon, the king of the Amorites. In the case of Edom, Moshe did not mention Bnei Yisrael's ultimate destination. The emissaries just said in a vague manner that Beni Yisrael wanted to pass through the land. In the message to the Amorites he stated:

*“Allow me to pass through your land: I will go along by the highway, I will turn neither to the right nor to the left... [we will buy our food and drink from you]...until we cross the Jordan **to the land which Hashem our G-d is giving us.**”* (Parshat Devarim, Devarim 2:27-29)³

Informing the Amorites of their destination was an important detail. The Amorites would want to know that Bnei Yisrael were passing through to a specific destination and were not planning to just loiter on their land. The Ramban asks why Moshe did not mention their ultimate destination when speaking to Edom. He explains that Moshe was deliberately careful not to make Edom jealous about the Land. Edom was an ancestor of Eisav and there was a real risk that they would become jealous of Bnei Yisrael's title to the Land. Mentioning Bnei Yisrael's destination may incite them to think negative, jealous thoughts. They might claim that they were really entitled to the Land because Eisav, as the firstborn, should have received it. They may start to dwell on the fact that the Land was taken “deceitfully” by Yaakov when he “stole” Yitzchak's blessings.⁴

Moshe wanted to maximise the chance of Edom agreeing to his request. Therefore, it would have been politically unwise to mention information that may incite Edom. However, Moshe's careful wording also teaches us the

¹ Translation based on the online translation of Chabad.org.

² We see that our enemies are reluctant to help us, even though by doing so it causes them damage! It's an old story...

³ Note, in the account of this event that appears in our Parsha (Bamidbar 21:22) there is no mention of “the land which Hashem our G-d is giving us”. However, the narrative is repeated in a more detailed fashion in Sefer Devarim and the extra words do appear in that account.

⁴ See the story of this incident in Parshat Toldot. Of course the Edomites would conveniently forget the fact that Eisav had already sold the birthright to Yaakov. It seems that our enemies have selective memories. Once again, we see that nothing much has changed in the last few thousand years...

importance of not making others feel jealous. Bnei Yisrael had a special connection with Hashem and were granted the Promised Land. That information could be particularly uncomfortable for Edom who may have felt that they had missed out. Moshe was careful not to remind them of this fact which could cause them pain.

We are all blessed by Hashem in different ways and at different times in our lives. Some of us may be blessed with wealth, some of us may be blessed with children, or health, or a successful career. When people less fortunate than us see our blessings, they may feel pained and they may also become jealous, thereby contravening the tenth commandment. Therefore, it is considerate as well as wise to conceal our blessings.

We may argue that it is not our fault if our blessings incite others to feel pain or become jealous. It's the other persons duty to control their feelings of envy. However, part of 'v'ahavta l're'echa kamocho' is to minimise each other's pain.

In an ideal world, jealousy would not exist (except for kinat sofrim⁵ – or jealousy amongst Torah scholars). We would realise that all of our possessions, our circumstances, and even our problems are tailor made for us. However, this is difficult to achieve in practice. In order to treat others like we would like to be treated, we must exercise sensitivity in this regard. Practically speaking, this may involve making an effort to conceal our blessings from the view of others. The following illustrations are based on true stories:

Scenario 1: David trudges up the stairs to his apartment after a busy day at work. When he passes apartment 3, he notices dozens of balloons and streamers, piles of presents and a big sign saying "Mazal tov, it's a boy". "It looks like the Cohens finally had that baby" he thinks to himself. David opens the door to his apartment and immediately remembers that he forgot to empty the rubbish bin that morning. He dumps his briefcase near the front door, grabs the bag of rubbish and runs back down the stairs. When he passes apartment 3 again on the way down he can't help noticing that the area is completely cleared of decorations and presents. He bumps into Jeremy Cohen at the bottom of the building and asks him what happened. Jeremy explains that there is a couple in the apartment block that have been married for a number of years but are not yet blessed with children. Jeremy doesn't want them to feel any pain when they see the balloons and streamers so he brought everything into the apartment as quickly as possible.

Scenario 2: Rabbi Cohen is at a wedding when his mobile phone rings. He glances at the number and then rushes out of the hall. He only answers the phone when he is half way down the street. When he returns, his friend asks him why he took the trouble to go so far away. Rabbi Cohen explains that he was speaking to an older single who is struggling to find a shidduch. He didn't want her to hear the music from the wedding and perhaps feel envious that someone else has found happiness while she is still searching.

Scenario 3: Mr Levy bumps into his old friend Mr Gold while shopping in the supermarket. "How are your kids"? asks Mr Gold. "Baruch Hashem they're okay." answered Mr Levy. The truth is that Mr Levy's kids are better than okay. Mr Levy is blessed with very successful children who give him a lot of nachos. He is also blessed to have a very close and loving relationship with his children. But Mr Levy knows that Mr Gold is not so lucky. Mr Gold's children are always getting into trouble and he has a very difficult relationship with them. Mr Levy is bursting to talk about his children, but he sensitively avoids detailing his children's successes so as not to incite envy or cause pain to his old friend.

If Moshe Rabbeinu can temper his words to minimise the chance that an enemy nation might be provoked to jealousy or experience pain, then surely we can guard our tongues (and our blessings) in order to minimise our fellow Jew's pain.

Let's try something this week:

1. Be aware of the people around us who are not as blessed as we are. Even if they are more blessed than us in some areas, there will almost certainly be other areas in which we are more blessed than they are. Be sensitive to their areas of pain or sore spots.
2. Make an effort to conceal our blessings and successes and try to avoid describing them in detail where doing so may cause others to feel uncomfortable.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

⁵ Kinat sofrim refers to being jealous of other people's spiritual accomplishments. This is permitted (and perhaps encouraged) because it can stimulate us to work on ourselves and become better people.

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About Darchai Noam

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

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, usually 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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