

DARCHAI NOAM**Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם**

(Mishlei 3:17)

Korach, June 2015

darchai.noam@gmail.com

How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Korach – speaking softly and calmly¹

In this week's parsha we read about the rebellion lead by Korach, Moshe and Aaron's cousin. Korach gathers together a group of people, including prestigious people, leaders of the tribes and the wicked Datan and Aviram. They attempt to overthrow Moshe and Aaron as the leaders of Bnei Yisrael. Korach's group are angry about a number of things, including the fact that Moshe appointed his brother Aaron as the Kohen Gadol in an apparent act of nepotism.

Moshe asks Hashem for an open miracle to make it clear beyond a shadow of doubt that he and Aaron were appointed by Hashem and are the legitimate leaders of Bnei Yisrael. Hashem agrees and He causes the earth to literally open up underneath the rebels and swallow them alive, together with their households and possessions. Only Korach and his followers were swallowed up. A natural earthquake could not have such a specific effect. This was clearly an open miracle.

After such a dramatic demonstration by Hashem, we would have thought that Bnei Yisrael would get the message loud and clear. The complaints should have stopped and the people should have submitted absolutely to Moshe's leadership. Yet, remarkably, the complaints do not stop! The next day, Bnei Yisrael gather against Moshe and Aaron and complain that they acted inappropriately in killing the rebels (Bamidbar 17:6-7)!

Hashem commands Moshe to give Bnei Yisrael another proof of Aaron's greatness and legitimacy. Each tribe inscribes their name on a staff and provides it to Moshe. The tribe of Levi would have Aaron's name inscribed on its staff. Moshe placed all of the staffs in the Mishkan and informed Bnei Yisrael that only the staff of the tribe whose leader was chosen by Hashem will blossom. The next morning they inspected the staffs and found that Aaron's staff had blossomed with ripe almonds. The other staffs remained unchanged. Finally Bnei Yisrael got the message that Aaron was chosen by Hashem to be the Kohen Gadol.²

Why did Bnei Yisrael need the quiet, more down-to-earth, miracle of the blossoming almonds? Why didn't they get the message after the loud and impressive miracle of the earth swallowing the rebels? Perhaps we can learn from here that often the best way to really impact people is to talk calmly and rationally.

¹ This week's Darchai Noam is inspired by a D'var Torah that I heard from Rabbi Garfunkel on Parshat Korach a number of years ago.

² After the miracle of the blossoming staff, Bnei Yisrael did complain again - that it was too difficult to live so close to the Mishkan because too many of them were dying. This was a legitimate concern, borne by experience and was not a complaint about the leadership. Hashem responded to Bnei Yisrael's concern by appointing the Kohanim and the Leviim to guard the Mishkan and to make sure that Bnei Yisrael didn't get too close.

Certainly, there are times when we need to give a strong and clear message. Korach and the rebels had to be dealt with swiftly and decisively. There are times when this is unavoidable and we can't shy away from a strong message when that is what is needed. For instance, the only language that some of Israel's enemies seem to understand is power and force.

However using force is a necessary evil and is not the ideal. People generally respond better when we speak softly and appeal to their better judgement. It is difficult to imagine Korach and the wicked Datan and Aviram being convinced by the miracle of the blossoming almonds. But for the majority of Bnei Yisrael that is the message that they needed to hear.

There is a famous psychology study³ where a child is placed into a room with an adult authority figure and a treat. In the first case, the adult warns the child that they must not eat the treat and that they will be punished if they do. In the second case, the adult tells the child that it is wrong to eat the treat and that they trust the child to do the right thing. The adult then leaves the room and the child is left alone with the treat. The researchers found that more children succumbed to the temptation of eating the treat in the first case, when they were threatened with punishment. Appealing to the child's sense of what is right in a calm manner was usually the more successful approach.

In business, more successful managers minimise telling their team what to do. They often ask people for their input and their thoughts. In that way the people feel ownership of the decision and are more likely to comply. The good manager will gently and indirectly guide the team to the correct outcome and will only impose their will if it is absolutely necessary.

Sir Isaac Newton's third law of physics states that every action has an equal and opposite reaction. This principle applies in life. If you push someone, they will instinctively resist and try to push back. Otherwise, they will lose their balance and fall over! Speaking loudly and imposing our will can be equated with pushing against someone. The natural response is to resist. In contrast, speaking calmly and softly does not push against them. Instead of pushing against someone, invite them to join with you to push something else and thus work together to achieve a united outcome.

The Ramban wrote a letter to his oldest son, Nachman, with instructions to read the letter weekly. The letter contains advice on how to live appropriately. The first piece of advice that the Ramban offers his son is to get into the habit of speaking calmly to everyone.

Certainly there is a time to show force and to give our message loudly and clearly. But our default position should be to speak calmly and softly.

Let's try something this week:

1. When we feel tempted to use force or anger to convince someone, remember the lesson from the Parsha – Bnei Yisrael accepted the message when it was presented in a quiet, calm manner.
2. Instead of instructing someone what to do, try asking them for their input.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

*** **

³ I could not find the exact reference for this experiment. The details of the actual experiment may differ from the way that I have described it here. However the principle is the same.

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.