

## DARCHAI NOAM

### Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם

(Mishlei 3:17)

Devarim, August 2014

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

### Devarim – Giving criticism gently and effectively

In this week's Parsha we begin reading the book of Devarim. Most of sefer Devarim contains Moshe's final words to Bnei Yisrael before his death. The Parsha opens with a lengthy description of Bnei Yisrael's location:

*"These are the words that Moshe spoke to all of Israel, on the side of the Jordan, in the desert, in the plain, opposite the Reed Sea, between Paran and Tofel and Lavan and Chatzerot and Di-Zahav. It is eleven days' journey from Chorev by way of Mount Seir to Kadesh Barnea." (Devarim 1:1-2)*

Many commentators question the need for such a convoluted description of Bnei Yisrael's geographical location. Rashi explains that embedded in this description are words of rebuke for Bnei Yisrael. Instead of mentioning their sins explicitly, they are alluded to in the names of places. For example:

- the reference to the desert alludes to when Bnei Yisrael angered Hashem in the desert by saying "if only we had died";
- the reference to the plain alludes to when Bnei Yisrael sinned in the worship of Baal-Peor in the plains of Moab; and
- the reference to Di-Zahav (literally: sufficient gold) hints at the sin of the golden calf which was created with Bnei Yisrael's abundant gold.

Instead of explicitly reminding Bnei Yisrael of their past sins, the Torah relies on hints to convey the rebuke. Whenever we read the first few pasukim of Parshat Devarim, we can accept these hints as a gentle rebuke and as a personal message to work on ourselves. It is much easier to accept words of rebuke when they are presented in an indirect manner.

The following story clearly demonstrates this<sup>1</sup>.

This story takes place when Rav Kook was the Chief Rabbi of Jaffa<sup>2</sup>. During Shabbat services a congregant stood up on the bimah and announced to the congregation: "At this very moment, Shmuel the cobbler is working in his shop in flagrant violation of Shabbat". The man demanded that services be suspended so the entire congregation could walk together to rebuke Shmuel. Rav Kook silenced the angry crowd and insisted that they finish davening. "After the services are finished, we can all walk to Shmuel's shop, but only on condition that everyone follows my orders and acts as I do". At the end of the service the entire congregation followed the Rav to Shmuel's shop. The Rav approached Shmuel and said amiably "Good Shabbos, Reb Shmuel" and then continued on his way. Then, one by one, all of the members of the synagogue did the same. This gentle approach greatly impressed Shmuel. He locked his store and came to the Rav's house. He explained that he was suffering financially and felt forced to work on Shabbat. The Rav, together with the communal board, organised to improve Shmuel's financial situation. Shmuel never worked on Shabbat again.

<sup>1</sup> Raz, Simcha, *An Angel Among Men*, (Kol Mevaser Publications 2003), 88.

<sup>2</sup> He went on to become the chief Rabbi of Israel.

The following extract from Chovot Halevavot<sup>3</sup> reveals a realistic and an ideal response to criticism:

*One of the pious asked another, "Do you possess equanimity?"*

*"In what sense?" he asked.*

*"Are praise and insult equal in your eyes?"*

*"No."*

*"Then you have not yet arrived. Make the effort! Perhaps you will reach this level. For it is the highest level among the pious and the most precious of virtues."*

Note that the person being questioned is already considered to be 'pious', which is an exceptionally high level to be on. Yet he is still affected by insults. We should all be working towards this high level, however it is unrealistic to expect anyone to be able to remain unaffected by criticism.

Unfortunately we cannot completely avoid criticism. Human beings are not angels and are not perfect. We are placed in this world to constantly work on ourselves and to improve. This necessitates giving and receiving criticism. However many people, especially in this generation, are not receptive to mussar and are exquisitely sensitive to criticism.

Therefore, as we also learnt in last week's Darchai Noam, we need to focus on improving our ability to give effective criticism in a gentle manner.

Rashi points out that Moshe, like Yaakov, rebuked Bnei Yisrael shortly before his death. The Sifrei lists a number of reasons why rebuking before death is the best time to give rebuke.<sup>4</sup> If we explore the advantages of giving rebuke before death we can derive some recommendations on the best way to impart successful rebuke.

1. **Rebuke given just before death doesn't need to be repeated.** This suggests that a single, effective rebuke might be more successful than repeated rebuke. We can try to give effective rebuke the first time and then be patient, giving the recipient time to respond.
2. **Rebuke given just before death prevents the recipient from being embarrassed every time they see you.** We should try to give rebuke in a gentle, indirect manner, so that the recipient suffers less embarrassment.
3. **Rebuke given just before death reduces the likelihood of the recipient feeling hatred toward you.** If we give rebuke in a gentle manner there is less chance of such hatred.
4. **Rebuke given before death is clearly meant with the best intentions so it won't lead to a lack of peace.** If the recipient knows that we want the best for them they are less likely to be angry with us and more likely to accept our rebuke.

Let's try something this week:

1. Try not to rebuke someone unless we genuinely believe that we are doing it for their interests alone and out of love.
2. When we need to rebuke someone, let's try to emulate the method used in the beginning of this week's Parsha, ie the indirect way.
3. Make the effort to ensure that the recipient does not feel embarrassed by couching rebuke in gentle and sensitive terms. Do not remind others of past rebuke or mistakes.
4. Give rebuke once only. Wait patiently for a response and only repeat if absolutely necessary.
5. One effective method of gently rebuking someone is to talk about ourselves as struggling with the same issue and perhaps suggesting methods that have been effective for us.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

<sup>3</sup> Section 5: The Gate of Wholehearted Devotion of All Acts, Chapter 5.

<sup>4</sup> See Rashi to Devarim 1:3. Rashi brings two of the reasons from the Sifrei in his commentary.

## **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 parsha 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'reiacha kamocho' – loving one's fellow as oneself.

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