

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?

Devarim – the right way to criticise

This week we start sefer Devarim. The Torah readings of Eretz Yisrael and Chutz L’Aretz have finally aligned. For the first time since Pesach, the whole Jewish world will be learning the same Parsha. May this add to our feelings of unity.

In Parshat Devarim Moshe begins his final speech to Bnei Yisrael. His speech lasted five weeks and it will take us through to the end of sefer Devarim. Moshe summarises Bnei Yisrael’s history, he gives them guidance, revises the mitzvot and also gives them some much-needed rebuke.

Towards the beginning of his speech Moshe reminds Bnei Yisrael about the appointment of judges to assist Moshe in judging the people. Moshe explains the reason why judges were needed. The job was too difficult for Moshe to do by himself:

*“How can I alone carry your **trouble** and your **burden** and your **quarrels**?”*
(Devarim 1:12)

Moshe’s comments contain within them a number of elements of rebuke. Rashi explains that “trouble” does not mean trouble that Bnei Yisrael have, but rather trouble that they cause. They were a very difficult people to judge. If one party to litigation saw that he was losing he would try every trick in the book to delay proceedings. He would bring new proofs, find new witnesses or request additional judges.

Rashi explains that Bnei Yisrael’s “burden” refers to Bnei Yisrael constantly suspecting Moshe and his actions. For instance, if Moshe left home early in the morning, members of Bnei Yisrael would suspect that he was having shalom bayit issues. If he left home late, they would surmise that he was sitting at home plotting against Bnei Yisrael.

Rashi explains that “quarrels” refers to the fact that Bnei Yisrael were bad-tempered and fractious. They were often involved in disputes with each other, requiring independent judgement.

It is not surprising that Moshe needed assistance in managing the people!

However, let us take a look at how Moshe introduced this issue:

“I said to you at that time, saying “I cannot carry you alone”. Hashem, your G-d has increased you and behold you are today like the stars of the sky in abundance. May Hashem the G-d of your forefathers add to you a thousand times yourselves and bless you as He has spoken of you.” (Devarim 1:9-11)

Moshe begins with a beautiful bracha to Bnei Yisrael. The bracha was genuine, true and relevant. Moshe reminded Bnei Yisrael what Hashem had done for them in the past. He had increased their number in a miraculous fashion so they grew from a small family into a large

nation. Moshe then blessed them that this increase should continue in the future. Rashi explains that this was actually a double bracha. First Moshe blessed Bnei Yisrael that they should increase a thousand times, and then he blesses them that Hashem should continue to bless them even more than that.

This reference to Bnei Yisrael's number contained a bracha and a reminder of Hashem's goodness and love. It also provided a logical reason why Moshe needed assistance in judging the people. By choosing to rebuke them in this way, Moshe lessened the sting of his words. How? Moshe's bracha opened up the possibility that Bnei Yisrael were not totally to blame. Additional judges needed to be appointed, not only due to Bnei Yisrael's behaviour but also because of their vast numbers. Though Moshe needed to rebuke Bnei Yisrael, he did so in a very gentle and caring manner.

Perhaps the effectiveness of Moshe's rebuke lay in the fact that he was able to convey to Bnei Yisrael that they were loved (by Moshe and by Hashem). Therefore Bnei Yisrael were more open to accepting the content of the rebuke.

Moshe's thoughtful behaviour can be contrasted with a lawyer in court who needs to speak in a respectful and polite manner. Before disagreeing with, or criticising, the opposing lawyer, a common protocol in courts is to address the opposing counsel with the phrase "with respect". Yet, when a lawyer begins a speech with the words "with respect", we can be sure that what he is about to say does not come from a place of respect! And if the lawyer starts with the words "with all due respect" or "with the greatest of respect" then listen out for the barrage of insults and biting sarcasm that is sure to follow!

Criticism on its own can hurt. We can learn from Moshe the correct way to give mussar. We too can bookend our criticism with something positive to demonstrate that the comment is coming from a place of love. However it cannot just be empty platitudes. It must be something genuine, relevant and from the heart. Only when we speak from the heart is there a chance that the criticism will gently hit its mark and have the desired effect.

During this period of the nine days, leading up to the commemoration of the destruction of the Bet Hamikdash, we are urged to revisit the cause of the destruction – being baseless hatred. Sometimes we have to rebuke our fellow. Let's make the effort to do it in a gentle manner, solely because we love them. That would be an example of baseless love which is helping to rectify the sin that caused the destruction and the exile.

Let's try something this week:

The next time that we need to criticise someone, try to emulate Moshe. Try to think of something positive to say as well, something that is true, relevant and genuine.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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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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