

## DARCHAI NOAM

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

(Mishlei 3:17)

Matot Masei, July 2015

[darchai.noam@gmail.com](mailto:darchai.noam@gmail.com)

How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

### Matot Masei – dealing with anger

In this week's double Parsha of Matot Masei we read about the battle against Midian. Hashem instructs Moshe to take vengeance against Midian because of their responsibility for the sins of immorality and idolatry that we read about at the end of Parshat Balak.

After the battle, Moshe, Elazar the Kohen Gadol and the other leaders go out to meet the victorious troops. They are surprised to see that the troops did not kill the females, the very group of Midianites who were directly responsible for leading Bnei Yisrael to sin. Moshe was angry at the commanders of the army for this oversight (Bamidbar 31:14). Moshe dealt with the issue by ordering the guilty Midianites put to death. Elazar the Kohen Gadol (who had replaced his father Aaron) then taught the returning soldiers the laws of koshering utensils. Since the soldiers had brought back many utensils as spoils of war, this was an appropriate time to teach them. This passage is the source in the Torah for the halachot relating to koshering utensils.

Rashi notes that these laws should have been transmitted by Moshe himself. However, because Moshe became angry, he forgot the halachot. Elazar was required to step in and cover for him. This teaches us the danger of anger. (Perhaps it's no coincidence that 'danger' and 'anger' are almost the same word!) Even though Moshe was not angry for his own sake, he was only angry for Hashem's sake and for the benefit of the Jewish people, his anger still had a negative impact.

The Rambam advises us to aim for the 'golden mean' in all of our character traits. We should try not to go too far to either extreme. The only two exceptions are pride and anger. Both of these character traits should be minimised as much as possible. There are very few exceptions when it is appropriate to express anger. In some circumstances it may be appropriate to 'put on' an angry face (for instance when disciplining children). However, we should not express true anger if we feel it inside.<sup>1</sup>

One who is angry is compared to one who worships idols.<sup>2</sup> The two sins share the same root cause. Why would someone worship idols? If you serve the one true Creator then you have to do what He tells you to do. Some people are not happy to do that. Instead of man being created in the image of G-d, idols are gods created in the image of man. By choosing which idol to worship, and by bribing the idol with sacrifices, people can do whatever they feel like doing. They are denying Divine providence and putting their wants and desires ahead of Hashem. The angry person is guilty of the same sin. By giving primacy to their desires and wants they are worshipping themselves rather than Hashem. When things don't work out exactly the way that they want or expect they become angry.

Overcoming anger is difficult. A number of techniques may assist, including: taking a deep breath, counting to ten before responding (or counting to 100 for some of us!) or trying to remember that Hashem is watching us.

Rabbi Yisroel Reisman<sup>3</sup> explains a very insightful lesson about human nature and anger from his analysis of the Hebrew language.

<sup>1</sup> Rambam, Hilchot Deiot 2:3.

<sup>2</sup> Gemara, Shabbat 105b.

<sup>3</sup> Pathways of the Prophets, Artscroll 2009. This is one of the best books I have read and I highly recommend it.

All languages have synonyms – different words that have the same meaning. However, the Hebrew language is different. The Holy Tongue through which Hashem created the world does not have any true synonyms. There are many Hebrew words that may appear to have the same meaning. However, in truth, each word has a subtle but important difference. For example, there are many words in Hebrew that seem to mean joy, including 'simcha' and 'sasson'. However, the Vilna Gaon explains that whereas 'simcha' refers to the inner feelings of joy, 'sasson' refers to the external expression of that sentiment.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, unlike other languages, if one Hebrew word has more than one meaning then those meanings must be related.

There are two words in Hebrew that mean 'also' – 'gam' and 'af'. As explained above, there must be a difference between these two words. The word 'gam' is used when two things are equally expected. The word 'af' is used when the second thing is more surprising or unexpected. For example:

*In my garden I have grass, and I also (gam) have flowers.*

*In my garden I have grass, and I also (af) have a 3 metre statue of a pink elephant.*

The word 'af' has two meanings. It can mean 'also' and 'anger'. What is the connection between the word 'also' and the word 'anger'? We have seen that 'af' means 'also' in the context of something that is surprising and unexpected. Rabbi Reisman explains that unrealistic expectations can be a major cause of anger. If a person **expects** difficulties and challenges then they may be less likely to get angry. They will feel more prepared to just deal with the problems as they arise. If a person has unrealistic expectations then they may feel more disappointed and frustrated when things don't go the way they expect. Every new difficulty is a surprise, an *af*.

It's no coincidence that the famous phrase "*gam zu l'tovah*" ("this, too, is for the best") contains the word "*gam*". This phrase is attributed to Rabbi Akiva's teacher, Nachum Ish Gamzu.<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Nachum lived an extremely difficult life. However his view was that every extra challenge is a '*gam*'. Rather than being surprised or disappointed, he viewed each difficulty as another challenge from Hashem that was for his ultimate good.

How do we transition from an '*af*' perspective to a '*gam*' perspective of life in order to reduce anger? We can start by expecting challenges as par for the course, *nisayonot* (tests) that help us to grow. All challenges are from Hashem, designed to help us to improve our middot and become better people. Often we wait for a difficult time to be over so that we can 'get on with life' and serve Hashem. Little do we realise that our challenges **are** our life and that it is precisely through those challenges that Hashem wants us to serve Him.

Let's try something this week:

1. Expect that challenges will arise and greet them with acceptance and equanimity.
2. Remind ourselves that all challenges and difficulties come from Hashem and are designed to help us to become better people. There is no such thing as a challenge-free life. It is only through our precise challenges that we can grow in the way Hashem knows we need to.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

\*\*\* \*\*

---

<sup>4</sup> Rabbi Reisman brings a possible exception to this rule – 'Naar' (youth) and 'Yeled' (child). Naar is usually understood to refer to an older child while yeled refers to a younger child. However Rabbi Reisman brings Rabbi Yaakov Kaminetsky who states that there is actually no difference between these two words. This is based on Melcham II 4:26-35 where the two words seem to be used interchangeably to describe the same child. Rabbi Reisman leaves this question unanswered.

<sup>5</sup> He was given the name "Gamzu" because he frequently said the phrase "Gam zu l'tovah". Remarkably, he is buried right in the middle of a residential street in suburban Tzfat and his tomb is a popular site for visitors.

## **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](mailto:darchai.noam@gmail.com) with the word 'subscribe' or 'unsubscribe' in the subject.