

DARCHAI NOAM

Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם

(Mishlei 3:17)

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Ki Teitzei – leaving things to Hashem

This is the third Parsha in a row crammed full of mitzvot. One of the mitzvot that we learn this week is the mitzvah to build a fence around the roof of your house. An exposed flat roof may present a danger as someone could fall off the roof and hurt themselves or die. This prohibition accords with the general prohibition against creating a dangerous situation.

There are 2 categories of people that might be harmed if we fail to fence our roof:

- people that are totally innocent; and
- people that are wicked.

We may presume that one who is wicked deserves to be punished and it would not be a tragedy if such a person came to harm on our roof. Of course we are not in a position to judge others and we can never be sure if someone is deserving of punishment or not. So we take precautions to prevent all people from coming to harm.

However, the specific wording of the pasuk that describes the mitzvah of building a fence around our roof is as follows:

*When you build a new house you shall make a fence for your roof so that blood shall not be spilled in your house ie that **the one who falls** might fall from your roof.*

Note the unusual inclusion of “the one who falls”. Rashi¹ explains that “one who falls” refers to one who deserves to fall. This is someone who is wicked and about whom it has been decreed in Heaven that he is deserving of death. It is precisely these people that we are told to protect from harm. (Needless to say, how much more so we need to protect innocent people from harm!) Why is the Torah concerned that we protect wicked people who are deserving of punishment anyway? Rashi explains² that good things happen through deserving people and negative things happen through people who are guilty. Righteous people are and strive to be vehicles for good. Wicked people are keen to dispense bad tidings or be the cause of someone else’s downfall. Even if the person falling off the roof deserves his fate, it doesn’t have to happen through us. Hashem has many agents in this world and He will make sure that each wicked person receives his just punishment.

The Egyptians enslaved Bnei Yisrael and made them suffer tremendously. As we all know, the Egyptians were punished for their role, through the 10 plagues and at the Yam Suf. Hashem had already told Avraham many years earlier that his offspring were destined to be enslaved and oppressed in a foreign land.³ The Egyptians could argue that they did not deserve to be punished because they were merely fulfilling Hashem’s will. However,

¹ As elucidated by Rashi K’phsuto.

² Quoting Sifrei 22:68.

³ Breishit 15:13.

Hashem did not tell Avraham in which land his offspring would suffer. The Egyptians were not forced to be Hashem's agent of punishment. Even if they knew that Bnei Yisrael were destined to be slaves, they could have said "Let Bnei Yisrael suffer through someone else's hand. We want no part in their suffering".

Translating this lesson to ourselves, we can learn that our role is not to play an agent of punishment or justice. Our focus needs to be on how to help our fellow. Even if that person is deserving of punishment, that should not be our concern. The following story highlights the tragedy of erroneously dispensing justice (or mussar) to others.⁴

Times were tough for Mordechai. He used to be a successful businessman. However, after a series of problems, he was now reduced to begging for help. With the situation now at its lowest and Mordechai getting increasingly desperate, he decided to pay a visit to Reuven, the wealthiest man in town. Reuven welcomed Mordechai into his office with a warm handshake and sat him down in the luxurious chair on the other side of his mahogany desk. Mordechai looked around at the thick carpet and the expensive paintings on the wall. He was hopeful that he would receive a generous sum or a large loan to help him back on his feet. Reuven felt that he knew exactly what Mordechai needed. He reached over to one of his drawers and pulled out a copy of Chovot Halevavot – the classic mussar work. He proceeded to give Mordechai a lengthy discourse on the importance of emunah and having faith in Hashem. Reuven lectured Mordechai on his need to work extra hard on his faith, especially in such times of financial distress. Reuven then wished Mordechai the very best of luck and sent him on his way.

Let's put aside the fact that we are not capable of objectively deciding who is wicked and what is just in each situation and the fact that all people (us included) commit sins and are deserving of rebuke or punishment. Nevertheless, we may know someone who we genuinely believe to be deserving of rebuke or punishment. However we do not need to be the one to carry that out. We can leave it to Hashem to sort out. If we have pure intentions, and if the time is right, it might sometimes be appropriate for us to give some mussar to our fellow. However, in general we should try to avoid being the one to dispense with justice. It is much easier to leave such decisions and actions to He who knows best to choose the mechanism and vehicle for that which needs to be carried out.

Let's try something this week:

1. If we see someone acting incorrectly, we don't need to rush to correct them or give them their just desserts (unless by doing so we can prevent someone else from getting hurt from their action).
2. Trust Hashem to carry out punishment in the best way possible, without volunteering to be involved.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi Ledder

⁴ Based on a story heard from Rav Moshe Donnebaum.

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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