

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?

Shoftim – the dangers of disagreements

In this week's Parsha of Shoftim, Moshe revises a large number of the mitzvot for Bnei Yisrael. One of the topics that Moshe covers is the role of the Sanhedrin in resolving halachic disputes and issuing rulings that are binding on the entire nation. The Sanhedrin was located in Jerusalem, near the Bet Hamikdash. If the lower courts had a dispute and were not able to resolve a matter, they would present the case to the Sanhedrin as the final, binding authority.

“If a matter of judgement is hidden from you, between blood and blood, between judgement and judgement, between plague and plague, matters of dispute in your cities – you shall arise and ascend to the place that Hashem your G-d chooses [i.e. Jerusalem]” (Devarim 17:8)

Rashi explains that this pasuk is providing examples of various halachic disputes that can be brought to the Sanhedrin for a final ruling:

- Blood and blood - the status of a blood sample and whether it renders someone a niddah
- Judgement and judgement - whether a defendant is guilty or innocent
- Plague and plague - the status of a skin lesion and whether it constitutes tzara'as.

Rav Meir Shapiro¹ was a quick and brilliant thinker. He was renowned for his ability to read words in a unique way to bring out a novel interpretation.² For example, Rav Shapiro was once collecting tzedaka to fund his Yeshiva. One of the people that he approached was reluctant to contribute and he challenged the Rav by quoting the Mishnah in Pirkei Avot:³ “Why do you need so much money to support the Yeshiva? We learn in Pirkei Avot: ‘This is the way of Torah: eat bread with salt, drink water in small measure, sleep on the ground and live a life of deprivation!’” Without missing a beat Rav Shapiro responded: “You are reading the Mishna incorrectly. You should read it as follows: “Is this the way of Torah? To eat bread with salt, drink water in small measure, sleep on the ground and live a life of deprivation?!?”

As an aside, this reminds me of a joke. A man was swimming in a lake. Another man saw him and said “What are you doing? Didn't you read the sign? It says: Danger! No Swimming allowed!” The other man replied “Yes I saw the sign but I think you misread it. It says: Danger? No! Swimming Allowed!”

Rav Shapiro had a novel interpretation of the above-quoted pasuk with a powerful mussar message. Rav Shapiro was once asked to explain why the Jews were singled out for so much suffering. He quoted this pasuk, however he slightly changed the punctuation and emphasis to give a very different meaning:

*“If you are surprised by a judgement against you, in matters of blood or judgement or plagues, **it is because** there are disputes in your cities! You shall arise and ascend to the place that Hashem has chosen.”*

¹ 1887-1933, the instigator of the Daf Yomi program and the founder and Rosh Yeshiva of the Chochmai Lublin Yeshiva.

² Heard from Rabbi Yisroel Reisman.

³ Avot 6:4.

Thus, Rav Shapiro explains this pasuk as teaching that the reason why the Jewish people suffer is because of the prevalence of disputes amongst us. For instance, the destruction of the Bet Hamikdash was due to baseless hatred amongst the Jewish people. Whereas disagreement per se is normal, resentment and personal animosity are unacceptable. Hillel and Shammai provide prime examples of disputes which are deemed acceptable and even praiseworthy, because they argued simply for the sake of Heaven. Though they argued and disagreed passionately on a number of halachic matters⁴ their debates were purely for the sake of discovering Hashem's truth. There was no personal animosity and their followers interacted socially and intermarried freely.⁵

Perhaps we can emulate Rav Shapiro's method of finding hidden meaning in this pasuk. The end of the pasuk may contain an answer to Jewish suffering. After explaining that disputes are the cause of our suffering, the pasuk instructs: "arise and ascend to the place that Hashem has chosen". The pasuk says 'arise' and 'ascend'. This seems to be redundant. Perhaps 'arise' means to rise above our petty disputes and step away from them. Perhaps 'ascend' means that we should actually grow from the experience. The pasuk then tells us to go to the place that Hashem has chosen. This is a reference to Jerusalem and the Bet Hamikdash. In our day we are not privileged to have the Bet Hamikdash, but we still have places of Torah learning and prayer. If we go to 'the place that Hashem has chosen' we will be reminded that our purpose is to serve Hashem. That will help us to broaden our perspective and to stop focusing on our personal desires and disputes.

As well as explaining Jewish history, Rav Shapiro is teaching a powerful lesson in mussar. If things are going badly we need to undertake a self-accounting, examine our deeds and improve. In truth, it would be incorrect to say that all of our suffering is caused by our own misdeeds.⁶ We cannot presume to know why Hashem causes suffering to happen and it is not our place to ask why. However we can still extract something positive from challenges by using them as an impetus for self-improvement.

It is important to note that this approach is only appropriate when we are dealing with our own suffering. In contrast, when we are comforting others it is an inappropriate time to tell them to improve their ways. When someone is suffering they usually need empathy and support. Later, when the suffering has passed, it may be appropriate to point out avenues for self-improvement.

The book of Iyov (Job) tackles the difficult question of how to respond to suffering. Though Iyov was righteous and tremendously successful, he suffered indescribable torment and almost lost everything that he had. Three good friends came to visit and comfort him. The friends tried their best to come up with the right words but failed dismally. They offered messages such as: "you need to examine your behaviour" and "you must have done something wrong to deserve this suffering". Even if their message was correct, their timing was wrong. When others are suffering we should avoid philosophising and just be there for them.

Let's try something this week

1. The next time that we encounter personal suffering, try to use it as a springboard to analyse our behaviour. The month of Elul is an opportune time to rely on Hashem's accessibility to reflect on our actions and try to repent and improve our ways.
2. When comforting someone else, take care to avoid giving mussar and instead focus on giving comfort and support. Save the philosophising for another time.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

⁴ Actually, most of the disputes were between Bet Hillel and Bet Shammai, the students of Hillel and Shammai after the death of these two great leaders. Hillel and Shammai themselves only disagreed in a few areas.

⁵ Gemara, Yevamot 13a-b.

⁶ The reason for suffering is a difficult and enigmatic topic of Jewish philosophy. See for example Gemara Brachot 5a and the concept of 'yisurim shel ahava'.

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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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