

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 Tisa – being careful not to embarrass others

In this week's Parsha of Ki Tisa we read about the terrible sin of the Egel Hazahav (the Golden Calf). If you pay attention to the reading at shule this Shabbat you might notice something unusual. The first aliya, that of Kohen, is unusually long. The second aliya, that of Levi, is even longer. In fact, it is the longest aliya of the entire year, even longer than those weeks in which we read a double Parsha. Why?

The Torah teaches us that the entire tribe of Levi did not participate in the sin of the Egel Hazahav. When Moshe came down from Har Sinai and saw what was going on, he said "Whoever is for Hashem, join me." The entire tribe of Levi gathered around him (Shmot 32:26). At Moshe's command, the Leviim then went through the camp killing the perpetrators of the sin.

The first two aliyot are deliberately longer than usual so that the entire story of the Egel Hazahav is read while a Levi is called up to the Torah. The reason for this deliberate orchestration is to avoid the possibility of causing embarrassment. There is a chance that a non-Levi may feel embarrassed to be called up for a portion that discusses a sin of their ancestors. Only the Leviim can be sure that their family is innocent of this sin.

When we examine the episode of the Egel Hazahav, we see that there a number of mitigating factors that lower the severity of the transgression.

- The number of people that were killed as punishment for the Egel Hazahav, as a percentage of the population, was remarkably low. This suggests that the vast majority of Bnei Yisrael did not participate in the sin.
- The Midrash tells us that it was mainly the Erev Rav (the 'mixed multitude' of non-Jewish people who followed Bnei Yisrael after the Exodus) who were involved in the sin.
- Many of the people who did sin were acting out of genuine fear after the Satan showed them an image of Moshe in his coffin. The people were genuinely afraid that Moshe was dead and they were desperate for guidance. They panicked and they did not know what else to do.

Yet, though there are mitigating factors which may reduce the embarrassment that a descendant of the perpetrators would feel, Chazal are exquisitely sensitive to even the slightest chance of such discomfort. Therefore, they implemented the unusual divisions of this Parsha to minimise even this slim chance of causing pain.

The famous story in the Torah of Yehuda and Tamar teaches us this lesson of sensitivity to others feelings.¹ Tamar was being lead to the furnace for capital punishment for acting immorally. She sent an encrypted message to Yehuda, revealing that she became pregnant from the owner of the signet ring, cloak and staff that she had in her possession. Though she could have tried to save herself by revealing Yehuda's identity, she chose to risk being put to death rather than

¹ Breishit, Chapter 38.

embarrassing Yehuda in public. The Gemara derives from here that it is better for a person to cast themselves into a fiery furnace than to embarrass someone in public.² Though it is unclear how literally this statement should be taken, it is certainly clear that we should go to great lengths to be sensitive to others and to avoid causing embarrassment.

One example of this teaching is the incident related in the Gemara of Mar Ukva and his wife.³ They would regularly give charity anonymously to a poor neighbour. One day the neighbour came outside to pursue the anonymous benefactors in order to discover their identity. Mar Ukva and his wife fled so that the poor person should not feel embarrassed that his neighbours were his benefactors. The only place that they could hide was in a hot furnace. Due to their great merits they were protected from harm in the furnace and they came out safely.⁴

This trait of being sensitive to other's feelings and avoiding causing embarrassment originates from the more general teaching of v'ahavta l'reiecha kamocho – loving our neighbour like ourselves. Just as we would go to great lengths to protect ourselves from shame or humiliation, so too we should make the same effort to minimise the discomfort of others. The following are some situations where the risks of causing embarrassment are particularly high:

- Parents are responsible for teaching and guiding their children and they often need to give them 'constructive criticism'. However parents should try to be careful to avoid causing their children unnecessary embarrassment in front of their siblings or friends.
- Though teachers are responsible for teaching and guiding their students, they too should take care not to embarrass their students in front of their peers.
- In managing their staff, employers should endeavour to provide any necessary negative feedback in private.

Let's try something this week:

1. Be aware of other people's feelings and sensitivities and make every effort to avoid placing someone else in a position of shame.
2. We can even take this sensitivity one step further and actively create situations which increase people's feelings of self-worth. For instance, we could host someone needy for a meal and then thank them so much for making our Shabbat experience more enjoyable.
3. If we have caused others to feel embarrassed we should apologise and ask for forgiveness. This can be a difficult thing to do but the feeling of accomplishment and relief that we will get if we can do it successfully will be worth it!

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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² Brachot 43b, Baba Metzia 59a and Sota 10b.

³ Gemara Ketubot 67a.

⁴ Mar Ukva's feet did start to burn from the hot floor and he had to stand on his wife's feet to protect himself from the heat. His wife explained that her merits were slightly greater because she would often give ready to eat food to poor people whereas Mar Ukva usually gave money.

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 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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