

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Ki Tisa
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Ki Tisa – turning a negative trait into a positive trait

In this week's Parasha of Ki Tisa, we read about the sin of the golden calf. This is a very difficult sin to understand. It occurs only 40 days after Hashem himself appears to Bnei Yisrael and commands them not to worship idols. How could Bnei Yisrael sink so low, so soon after experiencing the Divine revelation?

Some commentators point out that it was the erev rav (the mixed multitude that came along with Bnei Yisrael when they left Mitzrayim) that were responsible for the golden calf. Others point out that most of Bnei Yisrael were not directly involved in the idol worship, but rather sinned by allowing it to happen. Other commentators explain that Bnei Yisrael thought that Moshe was dead and they were desperate for a tangible means of connecting with Hashem. Without Moshe to guide them, building an idol was the only way that they knew of connecting with the Divine. Yet despite these explanations, the sin of the golden calf was one of the lowest points of our national history.

After the sin of the golden calf, Hashem was very angry with Bnei Yisrael. He told Moshe that he would destroy the nation and make Moshe himself into a great nation instead. Moshe jumped to Bnei Yisrael's defence with admirable self-sacrifice. He said to Hashem that if He did not forgive Bnei Yisrael for this sin, then Hashem should erase Moshe's name from the entire Torah. Moshe did not give up defending Bnei Yisrael to Hashem until Hashem agreed to forgive them!

Let's have a closer look at Hashem's complaint against Bnei Yisrael and Moshe's defence:

*And Hashem said to Moshe: "I have seen this people and behold, Am K'she Oref Hu **(they are a stiff necked people)**." (Shemot 32:9).*

Hashem considers Bnei Yisrael an "Am K'she Oref" – a stiff-necked people. This essentially refers to their characteristic of stubbornness. Rashi explains the expression as follows. Bnei Yisrael turn the hardness of the backs of their necks toward those who reprove them, and they refuse to listen.

Now let's consider Moshe's defence of the people. As Bnei Yisrael's defence attorney, we would expect Moshe to focus on their positive character traits in order to convince Hashem that Bnei Yisrael deserve to be forgiven. However, Moshe pleads as follows:

*"If I have now found favour in Your eyes, O Lord, let the Lord go now in our midst **because they are a stiff necked people**, and You shall forgive our iniquity and our sin and take us as Your possession." (Shemot 34:9).*

Ironically, though Hashem wants to destroy Bnei Yisrael because they are stiff-necked, Moshe argues that they should be forgiven for exactly the same reason!

Moshe uses the Hebrew word 'ki' which is usually translated as 'because'. However Rashi explains that ki can have a number of different meanings. In this case, Rashi understands 'ki' to mean 'if'. So according to Rashi the translation of Moshe's plea thus reads: "...let the Lord go

now in our midst [even] if they are a stiff necked people...". Together with other commentators, Rashi explains that Moshe was asking for mercy. According to this interpretation, Moshe is in effect acknowledging that Bnei Yisrael have this negative character trait of stubbornness, and this is exactly why they need Hashem's forgiveness and mercy.

In contrast, the Meiri¹ understands that the word 'ki' in this verse means 'because'. Based on this translation, Moshe is saying to Hashem that Bnei Yisrael deserves to be forgiven precisely **because** they have this character trait of stubbornness.

Let's examine this further.

Moshe was a prophet. This means he had the benefit of foresight. He was aware of the Jewish people's future suffering over the course of our history. He could foresee thousands of years of persecution, pogroms, destruction, exiles, the inquisition, the holocaust, the intifida...

Moshe understood that most people under such trauma would say to Hashem: "Is this the price of your Torah? Is this what it means to be your chosen people? We're not interested! You can keep your Torah and keep your reward!" However, Moshe also foresaw that unlike most other people, the Jews would remain loyal and faithful to Hashem despite so much suffering. Why? Precisely because they are an Am K'she Oref. A stiff-necked people.

The Meiri is teaching us that this character trait is considered by Moshe to be not only positive, but essential.

Moshe took a negative character trait, the trait that led to idol worship, the worst of all sins. Moshe was able to turn that character trait around and show it in a positive light. We can learn from this that all character traits have a time and place when they are appropriate. We just need to look at the character trait in a positive light.

We are all very good at looking at our own character traits in a positive light and judging ourselves favourably. But we find it more challenging when it comes to other people.

The Chovot Halevavot² lists a number of character traits and instructs us as to the occasions on which they are appropriate to be used³. Even character traits that are negative and should generally be avoided have a time and place when they are appropriate. For example, the Chovot Halevavot states that pride is appropriate when interacting with those who deny G-d, so that we clearly indicate our opposition to their views. Anger is appropriate when we see that falsehood prevails over truth. In addition, sometimes it is appropriate to show anger when disciplining children (although we should not feel the anger inside).

Let us try to emulate Moshe and try to look at negative character traits in other people in a positive light.

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to keep in mind that all character traits have a positive aspect and a time and place when they are needed.
2. Choose a person with a character trait that really annoys you.
3. Now, contemplate a positive side to that character trait. Think about how that characteristic has helped you or the wider community in some way.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

¹ A French scholar in the time of the Rishonim (1249-1316)

² By R' Bachya ben Yoseph ibn Paquda

³ Gate 3, Chapter 10

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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’reiacha kamocho’ – loving one’s fellow as oneself.

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