

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Miketz
December 2019 / Kislev 5780

darchai.noam@gmail.com
www.darchai-noam.com

How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Miketz – Keeping good deeds to yourself¹

In this week's Parasha of Miketz, we learn about Yosef being transformed overnight from prisoner to the second in command of Mitzrayim, the world superpower of that day. Impressed with Yosef's interpretation of his dreams, Pharaoh gives Yosef the job of managing Mitzrayim's food supply so as to avoid starvation during the predicted famine.

Pharaoh's appointment of Yosef begins in Breishit 41:39. First, Pharaoh compliments Yosef on being understanding and wise. Then he appoints Yosef over his household and he gives him the responsibility of feeding the Egyptian people. Pharaoh then makes it clear that even though Yosef will have day-to-day administrative control, Pharaoh will still retain the throne and be the ultimate ruler. Pharaoh then appoints Yosef over the entire land of Mitzrayim. He gives Yosef his royal ring, fine clothes, a golden chain around his neck and a special chariot fitting for the second in command of the country.

At this point Pharaoh says something a bit odd. In Breishit 41:44 Pharaoh says to Yosef:

“I am Pharaoh, and without you no-one will raise their hand or foot in the entire land of Egypt.”

Why did Pharaoh have to tell Yosef “I am Pharaoh”? Did he think that Yosef forgot who he was? The whole world knew who Pharaoh was! One of the explanations that Rashi brings is that Pharaoh was reminding Yosef that he was still the supreme ruler over the land. However, Pharaoh had already made it clear to Yosef that he was keeping the throne and that he would outrank Yosef. Why did Pharaoh need to say these words again here?

Perhaps Pharaoh was reminding Yosef that he was the source of Yosef's good fortune. He was in effect saying: *“Just remember that everything you have comes from me. Without me, you would be nothing. Don't you forget that!”* Pharaoh was essentially giving himself an ego boost.

Pharaoh's behaviour can be contrasted with that of the angel who visited the mother of Shimshon (the mighty Samson, the famous nazir with superhuman strength who rescued Am Yisrael from the Plishtim). The angel pays a visit to Shimshon's mother to inform her of the birth of Shimshon and to explain certain important rules governing her conduct and his nazirite status (e.g. she could not eat anything impure and he was not allowed to cut his hair)². Shimshon's father, Manoach, wanted to clarify some information with the angel, but the angel cannot be found. Having informed Shimshon's mother of the news, the angel had disappeared. Manoach begs Hashem for the angel to return, and the angel comes back. The angel answers Manoach's questions and then disappears again. Each time, the angel performed his required function and then quietly went away.

Imagine if the angel had acted like Pharaoh. He would have hung around to tell Shimshon and his family (and anyone else who would listen) about his own integral role in Shimshon's leadership and the defeat of the Plishtim. *“If it wasn't for me, his parents wouldn't have known what to do and none of this would have been possible!”*

Perhaps we can learn a vital lesson from this in how to perform our roles and in particular, the good deeds that we do. Do we act like Pharaoh, or like Shimshon's angel?

¹ The comparison between Pharaoh and Shimshon's angel is not my original idea. I read about it many years ago but I cannot remember the source. If anyone knows the source for this idea, I would be grateful if you could let me know.

² See Chapter 13 of sefer Shoftim (the Book of Judges).

It is often tempting to act like Pharaoh and to boast, or just remind others of our acts of kindness. If we do something good, we usually want others to know about it. We are human and we enjoy the ego boost we receive from other people knowing about and respecting our merits.

Here are some powerful reasons for why we should try to act more like Shimshon's angel – holding ourselves back and resisting the temptation to boast about our good deeds:

1. The receiver might feel embarrassed if they know, or are reminded, that we are the ones who helped them. This embarrassment might mitigate the good we have done.
2. By avoiding taking about our good deeds, we strengthen our middot (character traits) such as self-discipline, gevurah (strength), and anava (humility). If we can manage to do this, then that's the **real** ego-booster!
3. In some circumstances, the reward that we receive in the world to come can be greater if we keep quiet about our good deeds. The Gemara teaches us that hidden things are blessed.³
4. By managing to keep quiet, we demonstrate to ourselves and to Hashem that we are acting more lish'ma (for the sake of Heaven) because we have negated any benefit from impressing others. Rav Avigdor Miller listed 10 daily acts that we can practice regularly to help us achieve spiritual greatness.⁴ One of these steps is to perform one hidden act of kindness each day that no-one – other than Hashem – knows about.

On the other hand, we need to be aware of the issue of chinuch (educating children). In some cases, children may benefit from seeing their parents performing good deeds. The personal example can teach them to behave in a similar manner. In such cases it might actually be appropriate to make sure that one's children are aware of the good deeds of their parents. One would need to carefully consider what is most appropriate in the circumstances.

The following Chassidic story illustrates the benefits of avoiding boasting about our good deeds and may hopefully motivate us to keep our good deeds to ourselves:

Once in the city of Tzfat there lived an extremely pious and humble Jew. He reached such a high level of purity that he merited a visit from Eliyahu HaNavi. One night as he was reciting Tikun Chatzot (the lamentation over the destruction of the Bet Hamikdash that is recited at midnight) Eliyahu appeared and offered to reveal to him secrets of the Torah. But there was one condition. This simple Jew had done a very special good deed on the day of his Barmitzvah and that is why he merited the visit from Eliyahu HaNavi that night. Eliyahu wanted this man to reveal to him what he did. The man refused. The good deed that he did was l'shem shamayim (for the sake of Heaven) and it was a secret, between him and Hashem. The man forfeited the opportunity to learn the secrets of the Torah and Eliyahu returned to heaven. There was a huge tumult in heaven that night. How could this person pass up the opportunity to learn with Eliyahu HaNavi simply in order to keep his deed between him and Hashem? His purity and piety were awesome. It was decided that Eliyahu would return the next night and teach him deep secrets of the Torah, even though the Jew would not reveal the nature of his good deed. The man became a hidden tzaddik. When he died, his soul was re-incarnated as the Baal Shem Tov.

Let's try something this week:

1. Look out for opportunities to do hidden good deeds.
2. When we perform a good deed, we can remind ourselves that there is another test to come – do we succumb to temptation to brag about it or can we be strong and keep quiet?
3. Remind ourselves that the good deed can be a secret between us and Hashem and this is much more elevated and valuable in Hashem's eyes.
4. If we do a good deed for someone and they know about it, try to downplay our role as much as possible and avoid reminding them of our involvement.

Shabbat shalom and Chanukah sameach!

Rabbi Ledder

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³ See Baba Metzia 42a and Devarim 28:8.

⁴ Try Googling "Rav Avigdor Miller 10 steps to greatness".