

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Tazria-Metzora
April 2018 / Iyar 5778

darchai.noam@gmail.com
www.divreitorah.net/darchai-noam

How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Tazria-Metzora – the proper method of speaking

In this week's double Parsha of Tazria-Metzora, we learn about tzora'at, a spiritual malady that appeared with a physical manifestation for certain negative behaviour such as lashon hara. Tzora'at could appear on a person's body, their clothing or their house. Only a Kohen was allowed to diagnose the symptoms and proclaim that the affliction was indeed tzora'at.

If one found a mark on their house, one would have to inform a Kohen and ask them to come and inspect their house. Specifically:

*“The one to whom the house belongs shall come and tell the Kohen, saying: “**something like an affliction** has appeared to me in the house.”* (Parshat Metzora, Vayikra 14:35)

The commentary of the Artscroll Stone edition Chumash brings three lessons that we can learn from this pasuk. Each of these lessons relate to the proper method of speaking and the vital significance of our words.

Lesson 1: Even if the householder is a Torah scholar who is armed with the requisite knowledge and able to diagnose with certainty that the affliction is actually tzora'at, he should only state “something like an affliction” because only the Kohen is allowed to state this definitively.

This teaches us the importance of avoiding speaking in a way that will encroach on someone else's role. Consider the following:

Reuven, Shimon and Levi were sitting together and talking. Reuven was telling the others about a medical condition that he was struggling with. Shimon knew all about that condition because a close relative had the same condition. He knew about the different treatment options and which were more effective. However, Levi was a doctor and this was his area of expertise. Shimon therefore held himself back and did not share his knowledge in front of Levi because he was concerned that it could make Levi feel threatened or uncomfortable. Later on, he called Reuven and privately passed on the tips that he had learnt.

Lesson 2: Whenever possible, we should avoid using expressions of impurity. It is not appropriate to state that our house is afflicted with tzora'at, which means that the house and its contents become tamei (impure). Rather, it is preferable to use vague terminology ('something like an affliction'). Only the Kohen, who is obligated by the Torah to pass a diagnosis on the house may declare the house tamei if that is the appropriate diagnosis.

Hashem Himself chooses his language with care. Each word in the Torah is placed there for a reason and is full of meaning. For instance, we learn that in general there are no extraneous words or letters in the Torah. Yet, in Parshat Noach¹ the Torah refers to 'animals that are not pure' instead of using the more straightforward phrase: 'animals that are tamei (impure)'. In the Hebrew this works out as an extra two words, in order to use politer language and avoid using harsh terminology.

¹ Breishit 7:2.

We may assume that words are not so important. Does it really matter which words we use to express ourselves? As long as we comply with the laws of lashon hara, surely a little bit of colourful or strong language should be harmless. But the Nefesh HaChaim² teaches us otherwise:

“...every word one speaks has an effect on the higher worlds...you cannot fathom how each single word you utter has either a constructive or destructive effect on the upper worlds... let me assure you that every trivial word or conversation is stored away and never lost...every word one speaks, even the sound of his voice is not discarded... thousands of winged angels take hold of the utterance and carry it up to the Heavenly Tribunal to be judged – either favourably, or the opposite, G-d forbid” (Nefesh HaChaim, Gate 1, Chapter 13)

We need to remember that every word that we say is stored forever and is heard by Hashem himself! That should be enough of a motivation to speak appropriately. How can we train ourselves to use proper, more refined speech and tone? We can try to imagine that we are standing before someone that we greatly respect or fear. For example: a judge in court when we are on trial; the leading Torah scholar of the generation; our boss; our school principal; the parents of our fiancée when we were first introduced (when we were still trying to make a good impression). Would we use improper language when standing before such people? Or would we weigh our words very carefully and choose to use beautiful, refined language?

Lesson 3: One should develop the habit of speaking modestly. Instead of speaking emphatically, one should become accustomed to saying “I am not sure”.

In last week’s Darchai Noam, we studied the dispute between Moshe and Aaron in relation to a korban that was burnt instead of eaten. We discussed the polite, gentle way in which Aaron presented his argument. Instead of stating his position emphatically, he did so in the form of a question. In this way he was able to successfully convey his point of view without directly challenging Moshe.

This indirect, humble way of speaking is recommended for a child that needs to question their parents. Children are obligated to respect their parents and this includes taking care not to directly contradict anything that their parents say. If children must disagree, then they should state it in a respectful and uncertain manner, such as “if I’m not mistaken, I understood it differently” or “didn’t we learn that the halacha is like this?”.

In the Iggeret HaRamban, the famous letter written to his oldest son, the Ramban provides us with some important practical advice as to how to achieve humility through our speech.

*“Once you have distanced yourself from anger, the quality of humility will enter your heart. This radiant quality is the finest of all admirable traits... **Speak gently at all times, with our head bowed, our eyes looking down and our heart focusing on Hashem.**”*

I cannot add to the beauty and practicality of these precious words.

Let’s try something this week:

1. Avoid using our words to encroach on another’s role.
2. Train ourselves to speak in a refined and moderate way. Remember that Hashem Himself hears our every word.
3. Unless it is necessary to do so, try not to speak in an aggressive and emphatic manner. Rather try to speak in a modest and humble manner.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

*** **

² By Rav Chaim of Volozhin, the primary student of the Vilna Gaon.

About Darchai Noam

Darchai Noam is available online at www.divreitorah.net/darchai-noam. You can access this week's edition of Darchai Noam, archived back issues of Darchai Noam and other divrei Torah.

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, usually 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.

If you know someone who might enjoy receiving this email please feel free to pass it on to them or email me their details so I can add them to the subscription list.

You are welcome to use the content of this email in any way that will help to spread the learning of Torah. However please attribute credit appropriately.

Many of the ideas that I use in Darchai Noam are based on ideas that I read or heard from various sources. Where possible I try to quote the source. However, in some cases I cannot recall the source. For that I apologise. If I do discuss an idea that I heard from somewhere else, any errors are purely my own.

Darchai Noam is available online at www.divreitorah.net/darchai-noam. You can access this week's edition of Darchai Noam, archived back issues of Darchai Noam and other divrei Torah.

How to subscribe or unsubscribe

If you would like to subscribe or unsubscribe to Darchai Noam, please send an email to darchai.noam@gmail.com with the word 'subscribe' or 'unsubscribe' in the subject.