

DARCHAI NOAM

Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Vayeshev, November 2013

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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Vayeshev – Being transparent

In this week's Parasha of Vayeshev, we learn about the feud between Yosef and his brothers. Yosef is given special treatment by his father and he has dreams of becoming the leader of the family. The brothers become jealous of Yosef. They decide that he must be stopped. They consider killing him but eventually throw him into a pit instead. Eventually, he is sold as a slave to Mitzrayim.

The brothers' behaviour (other than Reuven and Binyamin) seems appalling and unforgiveable. Although beyond the scope of this discussion, it is important to note that there is much more going on here than a superficial reading of the story would suggest. The brothers were all tzaddikim. They were on a much higher level than we can even comprehend. They knew that they were destined to be the founders of the Jewish people with a vital role to play in the history of the world. They formed the conclusion that Yosef was a dangerous threat to the future of the Jewish people and he had to be stopped. Perhaps their assessment was slightly clouded by a tinge of jealousy. But they honestly believed that their decision was correct. It turns out that they were wrong.

Have a look at Breishit 37:4. It says:

“And his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, so they hated him, and they could not speak with him peacefully.”

It is clear why the Torah tells us that Yosef's brothers hated him. That is an important piece of information in the narrative. But why does the Torah add that they could not speak with Yosef peacefully? What does this additional information teach us?

In his commentary to this verse, Rashi quotes the Midrash in Breishit Rabba:

“From what is stated to their discredit, we learn something positive about them, that they did not say one thing with their mouth and think something different in their heart.”

By commenting on their inability to speak peacefully to Yosef, Rashi is telling us that the Torah is teaching us the positive middah (character trait) of honesty and transparency. The brothers did not like Yosef and they did not try to cover up their feelings.

As we discussed in a previous Darchai Noam (Parashat Lech Lecha), if someone has treated us badly, we need to deal with the issue in an assertive manner. We should not merely speak peacefully and gloss over the issue while hating them in our hearts. By revealing our true feelings we can minimise hypocrisy and resentment. We also provide an opportunity for the other person to explain their actions or apologise, which can increase

peace. This doesn't give us a licence to be rude. We should still try to be polite and personable.

But is honesty and transparency always a positive attribute? Sometimes the ability to mask our true feelings can actually be a sign of maturity.

Let's consider Robert, who works in an office with a team of people. One of those people, Simon, is a difficult character to get along with. Robert has a particularly strong disliking for Simon. Their personalities really clash, and the less time they spend together the better. But due to circumstances, Robert and Simon must work closely together most of the time. Robert can choose to make his true feelings clear. But that would only cause the workplace environment to become very unpleasant. Robert has chosen to cover up his feelings and interact with Simon in as peaceful a manner as possible.

Sometimes covering up our true feelings might be the best approach. It can be helpful to speak peacefully with people, even if we don't feel that way in our hearts. It can increase peace and, as a side benefit, it can also help us to increase our self-discipline. Shammai teaches us that we should greet everyone with a cheerful face (Pirkei Avot 1:15).

The trick is to know which response is most appropriate in the circumstances. Is it better to express my feelings right now, or would it be more beneficial to cover up my true feelings, at least for the time being? If somebody has done something to upset us, and we can rectify the situation by having a frank discussion with them, then this would most likely be the appropriate thing to do. But, if we cannot realistically change the situation, and we cannot avoid spending time with people that we don't like, then it might be best to just keep the peace. The important thing is to try to make a rational, objective decision. We should decide with our heads, not with our hearts.

Let's try something this week:

1. Be aware of situations when you feel the need to say something negative to someone else.
2. Before you open your mouth, think carefully about the pros and cons of being open and expressing your feelings. If you're unsure, consider speaking with someone else whose opinion you trust.
3. If you decide it is appropriate to be open rather than keeping the peace, consider the best way to convey your feelings as respectfully as possible.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Allon Ledder

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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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