

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Vayeshev
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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 Yosef 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 decide to throw him into a pit instead. Eventually, he is sold as a slave to Mitzrayim.

The behaviour of most of the brothers (other than Reuven and Binyamin) seems appalling and unforgiveable. As an aside, it is important to note that there are deeper explanations 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. Thus, they formed the conclusion that Yosef's aspirations meant that he was a dangerous threat to the future of the Jewish people. They concluded that he had to be stopped. Perhaps their assessment was clouded by a tinge of jealousy. But they honestly believed that their decision was correct. As it turns out, their assessment was of course incorrect.

In Breishit 37:4 we read:

“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 positively on their inability to speak peacefully to Yosef, Rashi is teaching us that we can learn the positive middah (character trait) of honesty and transparency. Though the brothers did not like Yosef, they did not try to cover up their feelings and pretend otherwise to Yosef.

We can learn from here to avoid pretending to be peaceful to a person who has treated us badly, while hating them in our hearts. Instead, by revealing our true feelings, we can minimise hypocrisy and resentment. This can also provide an opportunity for the other person to explain their actions or apologise, which can increase ultimate peace. Of course, this doesn't give us a licence to be rude. We should still try to be polite and personable.

As the Rambam teaches,¹ whoever hates a fellow Jew in his heart transgresses a Torah prohibition.² When one person wrongs another, the latter should not remain silent and despise him. The Rambam brings an example of the behaviour that is to be avoided from the book of Shmuel Bet³: "And Avshalom did

¹ De'ot 6:5-6.

² Vayikra 19:17: "Do not hate your brother in your heart."

³ Shmuel Bet 13:22.

not speak to Amnon neither good, nor bad for Avshalom hated Amnon." In our Parasha, we see that the brothers did in fact confront Yosef with their complaints.⁴

The Rambam teaches the correct behaviour in these circumstances: A person is commanded to make the matter known and ask the other person: "Why did you do this to me?", "Why did you wrong me regarding that matter?" as the pasuk states: "You shall surely admonish your fellow."⁵

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 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.

In such cases, 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" (Pirkai Avot 1:15). Note that Shammai states this maxim in absolute terms. He does not differentiate between different types of people and different circumstances. He doesn't say "receive everyone who you like with a cheerful face"; or "receive everyone who you need to impress with a cheerful face". And he doesn't say "when the sun is shining and you're in a good mood and everything seems to be going your way, receive everyone with a cheerful face". He just says: "receive everyone with a cheerful face"!

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 feel anger or resentment in our heart, then this suggests that we should try to rectify the situation by having a frank discussion with them. However, sometimes we cannot realistically change the situation. Perhaps we have tried a few times without success. Or perhaps there is an ongoing personality clash and we cannot avoid spending time with a person that we don't like. In such cases 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 head, not with our heart. And then try to guide our heart to follow our head.

Let's try something this week:

1. Be aware of situations where we are starting to feel anger or resentment towards someone.
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 consulting with someone else whose opinion you trust, such as a Rav, a spouse or a trusted person (being careful to avoid lashon hara).
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 Ledder

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⁴ See Breishit 37:8.

⁵ [Leviticus 19:17]