

DARCHAI NOAM

Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם

(Mishlei 3:17)

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Vayetzei – Don't be a hypocrite

In this week's Parsha of Vayetzei we meet Yaakov's uncle Lavan. On the surface, Lavan seems to be a real gentleman. He knows exactly what to say. He generously invites Yaakov into his home and says: "You are my brother. Why should you work for free? Just name your wage". (Breishit 30:14-15).

But the reality is very different. First Lavan tricks Yaakov by swapping Rachel and Leah at the wedding. Then he constantly revises the terms of their business arrangement in order to get the best deal for himself at Yaakov's expense (Rashi to Breishit 32:7). On the Pesach Seder night when we summarise Jewish history in the passage of "Arami Oved Avi" Lavan gets a special mention – he is considered to be worse than Pharaoh because he tried to destroy the entire Jewish people.¹

When Yaakov finally flees, Lavan runs after him and acts totally innocent:

"Why did you run away secretly and conceal from me and not tell me? I would have sent you away with joy and songs; with drums and with harps." (Breishit 32:27)

Lavan's behaviour is hypocritical. On the outside he speaks self-righteously and appears like a saint. His name is "Lavan", which means white. He appears to be perfectly pure and clean. But under the surface, Lavan is wicked to the core. His name spelt backwards is "Naval", which means scoundrel. It is related to the word "Nivul", which means profanity.

Hypocrisy is looked upon very harshly in Judaism. That is why a pig is considered the epitome of non-kosher food. The pig is the only animal that looks kosher on the outside (split hoofs) but is lacking the internal sign of kashrut (it does not chew its cud). The pig spreads out its feet with its split hoofs as if to show the world how kosher it is. That is why something that is "very unkosher" is called "chazer treif" – unkosher like a pig. When we act one way in public and another way behind closed doors, this shows that we care more about people's opinions about us than Hashem's opinion. Hashem knows the truth about us. But for the hypocrite, their image and their ego are more important.

In Jewish law there is a distinction between theft and robbery. Theft occurs in a clandestine manner. At the time of the crime the victim is not aware of what is happening. Robbery occurs overtly and with the use of force. Remarkably, in Jewish law the thief is punished more harshly than the robber.² The robber only has to pay back what was stolen. The thief has to pay back double. And in some circumstances the thief has to pay 4 or 5 times the value of what was stolen. Why is a thief treated more strictly? The Gemara (Baba Kamma 79b) explains that the thief demonstrates that he fears people more than he fears Hashem.

Even though none of us are in the same category as Lavan, we can still learn from him. We all act hypocritically at times.

The story is told about someone who wrote a book about anger management. He went to the Chofetz Chaim to ask for a *haskama* (approbation).³ The Chofetz Chaim was very vague in his response. He

¹ When Eliezer came to choose a wife for Yitzchak the Midrash tells us that Lavan tried to poison Eliezer.

² In secular law it is the opposite. Robbery with violence, or the threat or violence, is treated more harshly.

³ A *haskama* is like a kosher certification. A well-known and reliable Torah scholar confirms that the contents of a book are in accordance with the Torah and with Jewish norms. This is obviously important for books that contain halachik content. It is equally important for books that contain hashkafa or philosophical ideas.

said that he couldn't give a haskama at the moment but he didn't explain why. The author started to become very angry. He yelled at the Chofetz Chaim and told him what a wonderful book it was. The Chofetz Chaim agreed that the book was well written, but noted that the author had obviously not internalised the message of his own book. Therefore the Chofetz Chaim could not give a haskama. In contrast, the Chofetz Chaim explained that since he wrote his own classic book on improper speech, he had never spoken a word of lashon hara.

When I heard this story it gave me quite a shock. I write a weekly Parsha sheet that tells people how to behave nicely to each other. Have I internalised the message of what I write?

Consider this fictitious story about a rabbi who recently made aliya from Melbourne. Let's call him Rabbi AL to preserve his anonymity. Rabbi AL had the idea of writing a weekly Parsha sheet which focused on a lesson from the Parsha that related to improving middot and treating each other with respect. Rabbi AL was qualified as a lawyer. Soon after moving to Israel Rabbi AL was told the following joke: "In Israel there are 3 lawyers for every citizen. If you are lucky you will find someone that only has 2 lawyers and you can work for that person." Rabbi AL was fortunate to have a job and he thought the joke was very funny. A few weeks later, Rabbi AL was chatting to the owner of the local makolet (small supermarket). The owner had a daughter who had just finished a law degree and he was very concerned about her ability to find work. Rabbi AL saw this as the perfect opportunity to share his joke about lawyers in Israel. Outside the makolet, Rabbi AL's companion innocently reminded him of his previous Parsha sheet which focused on being careful of how we speak to other people and trying not to cause people distress. Oops. (Perhaps if I keep on talking and writing about how to improve middot some of it will rub off on me!)

How do we know when we are acting hypocritically? This is a very difficult thing to gauge because our ego makes it difficult for us to be objective about ourselves. We naturally tend to paint our behaviour in the best possible light but find it very easy to preach to others about the right thing to do. We are all masters at justifying our own poor behaviour and we are often blind to our own mistakes. That is why we need someone objective who can paint a more accurate picture for us.

There is a trick that we can use to enable us to identify areas of our behaviour that need improvement. It is based on the psychological principle known as transference. This means that we often criticise a fault in someone else that we subconsciously find in ourselves. This is our built-in defence mechanism jumping into action. It is far easier to criticise someone else than to work on ourselves. The more irritated we feel towards another person for displaying this fault, the more likely that the particular fault is really a problem for us.

Consider the following example. Yehuda was driving to work one day when he almost had an accident. Another car came speeding in the opposite direction, well over the speed limit. Yehuda slammed on his brakes and the other car swerved to miss him. It was very close. The other car then just sped off. Yehuda was fuming. He couldn't believe that drivers could be so irresponsible. For the rest of the day he told everyone who would listen (and even those who wouldn't) about the dangerous driver with whom he almost collided. However, a few days later, Yehuda was very late to an important business meeting. He couldn't afford to lose this deal. He drove a little faster than usual, a bit over the speed limit. In fact, he almost had an accident, but luckily he swerved out of the way just in time. He had no problem justifying this behaviour to himself. This was an extremely important meeting and he was usually a very careful driver. Everyone slips up sometimes and we're only human after all.

Let's try something this week:

Pay attention to those times that we feel angry about someone else's behaviour and think carefully about whether we are sometimes guilty of the same behaviour.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

Correction: A few weeks ago I inadvertently called the parsha "Va'era". The correct name of the parsha was "Vayera". Va'era is in Sefer Shmot.

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 parsha 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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