

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Vayetze
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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Vayetze – the right way to criticise someone

In this week's Parsha of Vayetze we read about Yaakov's journey to his uncle Lavan in Haran. Yaakov was on the run from his brother Eisav who wanted to take revenge for Yaakov "stealing" the brachot, which Eisav erroneously believed belonged to him.

Yaakov finally arrived in Haran, alone and penniless. He had been robbed of all his possessions by Eisav's son Eliphaz¹. On his arrival, Yaakov found a group of shepherds with their flocks who had gathered by a well. The well was sealed closed by a large rock. Yaakov struck up a conversation with the shepherds.

“And Yaakov said to them, “My brothers, where are you from?” And they said, “We are from Haran.” (Breishit 29:4)²

After establishing that the shepherds were from the same town as his uncle, Yaakov asked about the wellbeing of his family. Surprisingly, Yaakov then asked the shepherds why they were lazing about by the well during the middle of the day!

“The day is yet long. It is not the time to take in the livestock. Water the sheep and then go and continue pasturing them.” (Breishit 29:7)

The shepherds patiently explained that the large rock that was blocking the well was to stop people from stealing their water. The shepherds had to wait until all of the flocks had gathered together. Then, the shepherds would combine their efforts to roll the large rock from the mouth of the well so that they could water the sheep. Only then would they be able to take the sheep back out to pasture.

The question is, how did Yaakov get away with asking such a question? He was only a stranger that had just recently arrived! And why did the shepherds answer him so politely and explain their behaviour. One would not be surprised had Yaakov received the following response:

“Excuse me! Who do you think you are to tell us what to do? It's none of your business!!!”

How was Yaakov able to criticise these strangers in such a calm manner and why did they not get angry? What was the secret of Yaakov's successful rebuke?

Some commentators have suggested that the secret lies in pasuk 4 (quoted above). When Yaakov first arrived, he greeted the shepherds politely, calling them “my brothers”. Yaakov demonstrated that he cared for the shepherds and he considered them like family. Once this brotherhood and caring was clearly established, Yaakov was then able to give rebuke, just as one would correct a close family member.

New immigrants to Israel can often struggle with the language.³ It is not uncommon to make a grammatical error. Native Israeli's tend to pick up your mistakes and correct the error. There is no emotion involved. They just repeat the word back to you without the error. Such behaviour would be unheard of in Western countries because it is not deemed to be 'politically correct'. If a 'new Australian' who doesn't have a strong command of the Queen's English makes a grammatical mistake, no-one would dare correct him. They

¹ See Rashi to Breishit 29:11.

² Translations are based on https://www.chabad.org/library/bible_cdo/aid/63255/jewish/The-Bible-with-Rashi.htm

³ If anyone can explain to me clearly when numbers in Hebrew should be masculine and when they should be feminine, I would be eternally grateful!

would just pretend that nothing happened and perhaps try to hide a smirk. Perhaps there is more than just a cultural difference at play. In Eretz Yisrael, the Jews are all family. Israelis see other Jews as brothers and help them like they would help their close family. Just like a loving mother would not let you walk out of the house with spinach between your teeth. Or she will tell you repeatedly not to eat with your elbows on the table. She loves you and wants you to be the best that you can be. Similarly, the native Israelis consider the new immigrant to be a family member and only want the best for them.

It is interesting to compare Yaakov's successful rebuke with what usually happens in an industrial dispute. Industrial action can often be extremely bitter and costly. The UK coal miners strike is a case in point.⁴ It lasted for almost a year from 1984 to 1985, although trouble had been brewing for much longer than that. It was referred to as "the most bitter industrial dispute in British history. At its height, the strike involved 142,000 workers and a total of 26 million person-days were lost to the strike. The UK Prime Minister famously called the striking coal miners "the enemy within".

Let's compare the coal miners strike with another incident of industrial action that took place in the US.⁵ When 2,500 employees in the White Motor Company went on strike for higher wages, Robert Black, the president of the company, didn't lose his temper and condemn or threaten the strikers. He actually praised them. He published an advertisement in the local paper complimenting them on the "the peaceful way in which they laid down their tools". Seeing that the strikers were idle, he bought them baseball bats and gloves and invited them to play ball on vacant lots so they would have something to do. He made an effort to learn people's names. He rented them a bowling alley to help them pass the time. His friendliness begot friendliness. The strikers, while battling for higher wages, actually began to tidy up the factory grounds. The strike ended with a compromise within one week without any ill feeling. We see here a case of separating the person from the problem, or "playing the ball and not the man".

The Orchot Tzaddikim⁶ advises us to speak gently to our servants (and other subordinates). He writes that this applies even during a dispute, and we should make sure to listen to their arguments and complaints.

We cannot avoid all disputes and disagreements, and sometimes criticism is necessary. The question is, how can we effectively rebuke without risking the relationship. The answer that we learn from Yaakov Avinu is to make sure the other person knows that we genuinely care about them. Before we jump into the heat of the battle we can pause and make sure we are rebuking from a place of love and for the right reasons.

Let's try something this week:

1. Make an effort to separate the person from the problem. Remember that you can disagree with someone but that doesn't have to mean that you don't care about them.
2. When you feel that you have to rebuke or criticise someone, stop first and make an effort to show them that you genuinely care for them personally.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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⁴ The following information comes from

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/UK_miners%27_strike_\(1984%E2%80%931985\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/UK_miners%27_strike_(1984%E2%80%931985))

⁵ Story taken from the revised edition of "How to win friends and influence people" by Dale Carnegie -

[http://people.duke.edu/~tkb13/courses/ece458-](http://people.duke.edu/~tkb13/courses/ece458-2018sp/readings/How%20to%20Win%20Friends%20And%20Influence%20People.html)

[2018sp/readings/How%20to%20Win%20Friends%20And%20Influence%20People.html](http://people.duke.edu/~tkb13/courses/ece458-2018sp/readings/How%20to%20Win%20Friends%20And%20Influence%20People.html)

⁶ The Ways of the Tzaddikim, a classic mussar work that was published anonymously about 500 years ago. The above quote comes from the section titled "Gate of Cruelty".

About Darchai Noam

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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.

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