

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Miketz
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Parashat Miketz – Be careful what you say

In this week's Parsha of Miketz we read about Yosef's time in Mitzrayim and his brothers' visits to purchase grain. Yosef told his brothers that they could only come back to purchase more grain if they brought their youngest brother Binyamin with them. However, Yaakov was reluctant to let Binyamin go. He had already lost Yosef - the first son from his favourite wife Rachel - and he didn't want to risk losing the second son of hers as well.

It is up to Yehuda to convince Yaakov to let them take Binyamin with them in order to buy the much needed provisions.

*“Then Yehudah said to Israel his father, send the youth [Binyamin] with me and let us arise and go... I will personally guarantee him... If I do not bring him back to you and stand him before you [i.e. alive], then I will have sinned to you **for all time.**” (Breishit 43:8-10)*

Rashi explains the meaning of the words “for all time” - Yehudah was offering to forfeit his life in the World to Come if he did not bring Binyamin back safely.

When Moshe blessed each of the tribes before his death he had a special bracha for Yehuda¹. Moshe prayed (successfully) that Yehudah finally come to rest and be admitted into the World to Come. Rashi explains that Yehuda was denied entry into the World to Come because of the excommunication he had accepted upon himself when he took responsibility for Binyamin. This seems surprising because we see that Yehuda ultimately did bring back Binyamin safely. So why should he be punished? This teaches the power of a Tzaddik's words. Hashem listens to every word of a Tzaddik. Even if they say something conditional and the condition is not fulfilled, their words can still be upheld, at least partially.

A similar phenomenon occurred with Moshe Rabbeinu in Parashat Ki Tissa. Moshe begged for mercy on behalf of Am Yisrael after the sin of the Golden Calf. He specifically stated that if Hashem did not forgive Bnei Yisrael, then Moshe himself should be erased from the Torah². Moshe's plea was a conditional curse. Moshe's name was only to be removed from the Torah if Hashem refused to forgive Bnei Yisrael. However, Hashem did in fact forgive Bnei Yisrael so the condition was not satisfied. Nevertheless, because Moshe was a Tzaddik his words were particularly effective and his name was erased from a whole Parsha. The Baal Haturim points out that Moshe's name is conspicuously absent from the entire Parsha of Tetzaveh, the Parsha immediately before Parashat Ki Tissa. This is the only Parsha where Moshe is not mentioned since he came onto the scene in Parashat Shmot.³

The holiness and power of a Tzaddik's words can also be seen for the good. For instance, there are many stories of Tzaddikim who promised that someone would have a child and their words came true. For example, in sefer Melachim Bet we see that the prophet Elisha wanted to show his gratitude to the Shunamite woman and her husband who had shown him much hospitality:

And he [Elisha] said, “At this time next year, you will be alive and you will be embracing a son”.
(Melachim II, 4:16)

¹ Parshat V'zot Habracha, Devarim 33:7.

² Parshat Ki Tissa, Shmot 32:32.

³ This doesn't apply to Sefer Devarim. Moshe's name doesn't appear in a number of Parshiyot in Sefer Devarim, however Moshe himself is the one speaking throughout most of that sefer.

The Midrash⁴ tells us that Elisha didn't even pray to Hashem to ask for a miracle. He was confident that Hashem would listen to his words and the son would be born. He was right. Hashem listened to his words and granted a son to the Shunamite woman.

Rebbetzin Chaya Sara Kramer is a more recent case in point. The subject of the book "Holy Woman" by Sarah Yoheved Rigler, Rebbetzin Kramer lived from 1924-2005. She survived the holocaust, although she was a victim of the infamous Dr Mengele and his cruel experiments and thus could not have any children. She lived most of her life in abject poverty, but she was always smiling. She adopted and raised countless children, most of whom had serious disabilities. She and her husband became known as hidden tzaddikim. Holy Woman brings the following story about the young Rebbetzin Kramer growing up near Munkacs in the Carpathian Mountains before the war.

When Rebbetzin Kramer was 8 years old, her father Mendel Yosef returned home one evening as a funeral was taking place. He was shocked to hear that a local 15 year old Christian boy named Ivan had died and that his own daughter, Chaya Sara, had killed him! He hurried home to find out what happened. Chaya Sara told him the story. Ivan was a well-known anti-Semitic bully. He delighted in making life very difficult for the Jewish children of their village. That day he had decided to pick on Chaya Sara. He accused her of stealing and then attacked her physically. Chaya Sara lost her patience and cursed him. She said: "You should die today and they should bury your body in the ground where the worms will eat it!" That very day there was an accident in Ivan's home and Ivan died. The non-Jewish populace was very quick to lay the blame for the death on the young Chaya Sara. Mendel looked at his daughter for a moment and then said: "If you have the power to curse, you have the power to bless." From then on, Chaiya Sara was careful to only speak words of kindness and blessing. Many people would come to her for a bracha.

This is all very nice, but how is it relevant to us? We are not Tzaddikim!⁵ Our words do not carry the weight of Moshe, Yehuda or Rebbetzin Kramer! Yet, the power of words is not limited to Tzaddikim alone. For instance, when Rivka left her home to travel with Eliezer in order to marry Yitzchak, her brother Lavan gave her a beautiful blessing:

"And they blessed Rivka and said to her: 'Our sister, may you become thousands of myriads and may your offspring inherit the gates of their enemies'." (Parashat Chaya Sarah, Breishit 24:60)

The fact that the Torah records the blessing of the wicked Lavan suggests that even a wicked person's blessings are important and can be powerful. Thus we should never reject a blessing or good wishes from anyone, because all words harbour potential power.

We never know for certain which of our words will come true. However there is one thing that is much more certain. Regardless of the efficacy of our words, cursing another or speaking onas devarim (hurtful words) cause pain to another. On the other hand, when we use our words to speak peacefully, to focus on the positive and try to build others up, we will almost inevitably have a positive effect on the other person's mood, motivation and self-esteem!

Even if we are not tzaddikim, our words are still important. Let's choose them carefully and try to make them words of bracha, peace and unity.

Let's try something this week:

1. Stop before you open your mouth (that is why our tongue is hidden behind two closed lips). Try to avoid speaking harshly or cruelly to others.
2. Try to use our words to bless and build others up.

Chanukah sameach and Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

⁴ "The Family Midrash Says, Melachim Bet", p63 and see also the Radak's commentary on this pasuk.

⁵ With apologies to any hidden tzaddikim who are reading this!