

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Matot
July 2022 / Tammuz 5782 (originally sent in 2019)

darchai.noam@gmail.com
www.darchai-noam.com

How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Matot – Everyone is important

In this week's Parasha of Matot, we learn about the the battle against Midian and its aftermath. After the debacle of Baal Peor and the resulting death of thousands of Bnei Yisrael,¹ Hashem instructed Moshe to take vengeance against the Midianites. This nation was primarily responsible for leading Bnei Yisrael astray.² One thousand men were selected from each tribe to go to battle. Hashem was with them, so not surprisingly they were very successful. They killed every male, including Bilaam and the five kings of Midian without suffering a single casualty. They returned to the camp with an enormous amount of spoils.

The Torah then devotes 30 pasukim to describing the spoils of the war and how they were divided up among the people. Hashem Himself instructed Moshe as to how to divide up the spoils. Why were the spoils discussed in such detail? And what lessons can we learn from this incident?

Lesson one. One lesson we can learn relates to the assumption that the soldiers who risked their lives and went out to battle should be entitled to keep all of the booty for themselves. After all, they could argue, they did all of the work! However, Hashem divided the spoils of this war in the most just way possible. Firstly, the spoils were divided into half – half went to the soldiers and half went to the rest of the people. We can learn from this that we as Jewish people should not follow the 'law of the jungle'. Rather, we must ensure that everyone shares in the bounty. Everyone has a role to play and deserves their share.

Lesson two. However, given that there were less soldiers than the rest of the people, the soldiers ultimately ended up with a larger share per person than the rest of the nation. We learn from this that the reward is according to the effort³ i.e. those that put in more of the effort received more of the reward.

Lesson three. Finally, a specified portion was to be given to the Mishkan and to the Leviim (as Hashem's representatives). We learn from this that Hashem was the true source of the victory. The service of the Leviim to Hashem was important, just like the work of the soldiers on the battlefield.

Let's analyse some of these lessons in more depth.

From the first lesson we can also learn not to look down on people that have an apparently “less important” role. The soldiers who go off into battle may get the glory, but they wouldn't survive without the support of the other functionaries.

The Chofetz Chaim brings the following analogy:

In the middle of a difficult battle, the commander went to check on his troops. They all seemed in reasonably good spirits, but they looked pale and weak. “Are you feeling OK” he asked each one? “Yes, sir!” they replied. “I’m just a bit hungry, sir”. The commander discovered that none of his men had eaten a proper meal in more than 24 hours. Furious, he

¹ Discussed at the end of Parashat Balak, Bamidbar 25:1-7.

² Moab was also to blame. However, Hashem did not allow Bnei Yisrael to attack Moab because the righteous Ruth (the ancestor of David HaMelech and ultimately the Moshiach) was destined to come from Moab (Baba Kama 38a).

³ Pirkai Avot 5:26.

went to the mess hall to find out what was going on. But the cook was nowhere to be found. Eventually he found the cook, on the front lines, with a rifle in his hand. "What are you doing?" he shouted, incredulous. "Sir, it's the middle of a war. We need all hands on deck. I'm helping to fight the enemy!"

If not for the cooks and the drivers, the guy repairing guns and the guy sitting in the office filling out forms, the soldiers on the front line would not stand a chance. Everyone has their role to play and it is not for us to decide who is more or less important. So too on the home front. Though the bread winner may look like he is the one performing the most important role, the housewife is ensuring that he has a home to return to!

David Hamelech later applied this principle when he instituted a law that those who go into battle shall receive the same share as those who stay back to guard the camp.⁴ Rashi points out that Avraham Avinu was actually the first to institute this law when he returned from his successful battle against the four kings.⁵

Sometimes, one of the best indicators of someone's middot is to observe how they interact with people who are "beneath them". People who hold no power over them. There is no apparent reason for one to treat such a person with respect, apart from common decency and recognising that they, like everyone else, contain a Divine spark.

I was once at a business luncheon in the city. One of the people at my table, a very senior executive in a publicly listed national retailer, was regaling us with another story of his accomplishments while the waiter was busily collecting the plates. The waiter made a mistake though, for the executive had not actually finished his meal. As the waiter reached out for his plate, he was stopped in his tracks by a stinging tongue lashing. "Excuse me! Can't you see that I haven't finished yet! Unbelievable. I can't believe the service here." The executive turned to the person sitting next to him and said "Did you see that?! Atrocious, wasn't it". [Yes, it was atrocious!] The other diners looked at each other awkwardly and the waiter left quickly.

The yeshiva in Chelm used to assign the various cleaning tasks to the students. Surprisingly, the most senior students were given the merit of performing the coveted job of cleaning the floors. This was done intentionally to teach the students that there is no such thing as a lowly job or a degrading mitzva.⁶

If we remember that every person is created in the image of Hashem and contains a Divine spark, then we would treat everyone with the respect that they deserve.

From the third lesson, we see that the victory was clearly miraculous. There were only 12,000 members of Bnei Yisrael and the sheer quantity of the spoils reveals how outnumbered they were. Thus, we should never fall into the trap of thinking that we are responsible for our achievements. Though we must put in our maximum effort, only Hashem controls the outcome.

Let's try something this week:

1. Remember that everyone is important and has a unique role to play. Every Jew contains a Divine spark.
2. Every victory that we experience must be attributed to Hashem. We could not even lift a finger if it was not ordained from above.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

* To subscribe to Darchai Noam, please email darchai.noam@gmail.com with the word 'Subscribe' in the subject.

⁴ See Shmuel Aleph 30:22-25.

⁵ See Parashat Lech Lecha, Breishit 14:21-24 and in particular see Rashi's commentary to pasuk 24.

⁶ Darchai HaShleimut by Rabbi Shloma Margolis (<https://www.aish.com/tp/i/pp/155048085.html>)