

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Mishpatim
February 2023 / Shvat 5783

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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Parashat Mishpatim – Dog food

In this week's Parasha of Mishpatim we learn about many different mitzvot that cover all aspects of life. One of those mitzvot relates to a treif animal and what we can do with it. In common usage, the word 'treif' is used to refer generally to food that is not kosher. However, technically it refers to an animal whose flesh has been torn, such as when attacked by a predator. The term also includes an animal that is injured or unhealthy to the extent that it will not live for 12 months. Such animals are forbidden for consumption, even if they are shechted correctly (although we are permitted to get other forms of benefit from the carcass).

What do we do with a treif animal if we can't eat it? Our Parasha instructs us:

"And you shall be holy people to Me, flesh torn in the field you shall not eat, you shall throw it to the dogs." (Shmot 22:30)

Why does the Torah instruct us to feed the treif carcass to the dogs? Rashi explains that Hashem does not withhold the reward of any creature. A few weeks ago, in Parashat Bo, we read about the role that the dogs played in the exodus:

"And there will be a great cry throughout the entire land of Egypt such as there never has been, and such as there shall never be again. But to all of Bnei Yisrael, not one dog will whet its tongue against man or beast, in order that you shall know that Hashem will distinguish between the Egyptians and Israel." (Shmot 11:7)

In contradistinction to the suffering of the Egyptians during the final plague, Bnei Yisrael enjoyed perfect tranquillity. This included the fact that not even a dog barked against them. The dogs went against their nature and refrained from barking. As a reward for this behaviour, they receive treif carcasses from us to eat.

This teaches us some important lessons. Firstly, we see the greatness of going above one's nature. It is the nature of a dog to bark and when the dogs in Mitzrayim went above their nature, they merited such a long-lasting reward. So too, we will be rewarded for going above our nature. Secondly, we see the extent to which we owe a debt of gratitude to others. The dogs that are receiving the treif animals are only distant relatives of the dogs that held back from barking in Mitzrayim. Most of them never even set foot in Mitzrayim! Yet we still reward *all* dogs with treif meat. There are many stories of Gedolim who express gratitude to a grandchild or great-grandchild because of an act of chesed that their ancestor did for the Gadol many years earlier.

Other commentators, including the Ibn Ezra, provide us with a different perspective. They point out that the dogs were in the field guarding the flocks. If an animal was mauled by a wolf or other wild animal, it usually took place out in the fields, and the dogs were right there. So it makes sense that we should feed the carcass to the dogs from a purely practical perspective. However, the Daas Zekeinim points out that the dog's job was to protect the flock from predators. Clearly the dog failed in this case. If the dog had preformed its job effectively there wouldn't be a torn animal! Why are we rewarding the dog for failure?

We don't just owe a debt of gratitude to someone who succeeded in helping us. Presumably the dog tried its best to fight off the wolf that wanted to attack the flock. After a valiant fight, the wolf won and thus managed to attack and kill a member of the flock. But the dog still deserves gratitude for trying its best. Similarly, someone might try to help us, but they may not fully succeed. But as long as they made the effort to help, they deserve our gratitude for that effort.

Furthermore, even though the dog might not have succeeded this time, we focus on the fact that they did succeed on so many other occasions. Presumably there were many times when the dog managed to keep the wolves at bay and the shepherd didn't even know about it. Rather than focusing on this failure, we should take the opportunity to thank the dog for all of the previous successes.

When someone fails to help us or makes a mistake and causes us grief, our natural reaction is to be upset or angry. When we manage to ignore our disappointment and focus on all of the previous successes, we are rising above our nature. Since the dogs in Mitzrayim rose above their nature, in return, middah k'neged middah, we rise above our nature and overlook their failure to protect the flock.

Those who work in the HR department might argue that we can take this idea too far. We want to incentivise success, not failure. But this lesson about the dogs teaches us a different perspective. If we treat people well, and focus on their successes, they are automatically incentivised to perform to the best of their ability. When an employee, or a child, or a well-meaning friend tries their best to help, but messes up, causing us distress, we should try to overcome our knee-jerk reaction and take a broader perspective.

We see back in Parashat Breishit that Adam HaRishon also managed to rise above his nature and focus on the good.¹ After the original sin, Hashem handed out the punishments to the guilty parties. As a result of the sin, death was brought into the world and Adam and Chava would be expelled from Gan Eden. They had been living in the lap of luxury, with all their needs taken care of. And now, it was all over. They were not having a good day. Adam had quite understandably lashed out at his wife and blamed her for encouraging him to sin (even though he was also to blame). But that wasn't Adam's response. Adam rose above his nature in spectacular fashion. The very first thing that Adam did after receiving the punishments was as follows:

"And the man named his wife Chava, because she was the mother of all life"
(Breishit 3:20)

No-one had more reason to be disappointed and angry than Adam. But instead of focusing on the negative, Adam zeroed in on his wife's best redeeming feature. It is true that death was introduced into the world as a result of the sin, but the first woman had the power to rectify that consequence by bringing new life into the world. Therefore, Adam named his wife Chava, which comes from the word Chai. What a beautiful, heart-warming response by Adam. How amazing would it be if we could also rise above our natures and focus on the positive rather than focusing on our disappointment and anger.

Let's try something this week:

1. Remember the amazing response by Adam HaRishon to his wife Chava after being punished for the original sin. Be inspired by that example.
2. The next time that someone messes up and causes you distress, try to overcome your natural reaction. Rather, try to focus on their efforts and their previous successes.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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¹ This comparison between our behaviour towards the dogs and Adam's behaviour in Parashat Breishit is based on an idea that I heard in the name of Rav Yissocher Frand.