

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Behar-Bechukotai
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Behar-Bechukotai – Hidden sins and hidden mitzvot

This week we read the double Parasha of Behar Bechukotai. Parshat Behar contains a number of prohibitions, three of which are followed by the words “and you shall fear your G-d”. Rashi explains that these three prohibitions involve hidden matters, in that only the perpetrators themselves really know whether they are committing these acts for the right reasons or with selfish motivations. With regard to these mitzvot, people can easily fool other people into thinking that they are acting with pure intentions, when in reality they are only serving themselves. Therefore, the Torah reminds us to fear Hashem because Hashem knows the person’s true motivation underlying their actions.

The three prohibitions from this week’s Parsha are as follows:

- *“Do not harass one another, **and you shall fear your G-d**, for I am Hashem your G-d”* (Vayikra 25:17). Rashi explains that this prohibition relates to verbal harassment. One should not give his fellow inappropriate advice that is self-serving. Imagine that Reuven asks his neighbour Shimon whether it is a good time to sell his field. Shimon secretly wants to buy the field, so he advises Reuven to sell it. If anyone were to challenge Shimon, he could easily claim that he was being objective and giving Reuven the best advice that he could. No-one else would know that in his heart Shimon had selfish motivations... except for Hashem.
- *“Do not take from him [Your fellow Jew] interest or increase, **and you shall fear your G-d**, and let your brother live with you”* (Vayikra 25:36). This is the prohibition against charging ‘ribit’ or interest when lending money to another Jew. It is permitted to charge interest when we lend money to a non-Jew and to pay interest when we borrow from a non-Jew. Rashi explains that a person could falsely claim that the money that he was lending to a fellow-Jew was not his own money but belonged to a non-Jew and thus falsely justify his charging interest. The lender would be ignorant of the fact that the money really belonged to the Jewish lender. However, Hashem would know the truth.
- *“You shall not subjugate him [a Jewish slave] through hard labour, **and you shall fear your G-d**”* (Vayikra 25:43). Rashi explains that this prohibition relates to giving work to a slave that has no purpose, work that is assigned merely to torment him. The master could easily claim that the work was actually for a necessary purpose. The slave, and other people, would never know the master’s true intentions. But Hashem would know what is inside the master’s heart.

In Parshat Kedoshim, the Torah also includes this phrase “and you shall fear your G-d” when it instructs us to respect our elders: *“You shall rise before an old person and you shall honour an elder, **and you shall fear your G-d**, I am Hashem* (Vayikra 19:32). This requirement to respect our elders includes an obligation to stand up in their presence. This mitzva also contains an aspect that can be hidden. A person can easily pretend that they did not see an elderly person walking in and thereby explain away their failure to stand. But we cannot fool Hashem or hide our true motives from Him.

In each of these cases, we may be tempted to sin due to the fact that our true motives can be hidden from others. No-one else knows what is going on inside the person's heart. This is why the pasukim reminds us to fear Hashem in this context. Hashem cannot be fooled. He knows what a person is really thinking. Reminding us to fear Hashem can help encourage us to avoid sinning in these areas.

This same principle can work the other way as well, to motivate us to perform good deeds even though they are hidden, simply to please Hashem. Instead of needing other people to be aware of our good deeds, our love of Hashem and the fact that we can please Him should be sufficient reward.

Here are some powerful reasons to do good deeds privately:

1. The receiver might feel embarrassed if they knew that we are the source of their aid.
2. By overcoming our desire to tell people about the good deeds that we did, we strengthen our middot such as self-discipline, gevurah (strength), and anava (humility).
3. In some circumstances, the reward that we receive in the World to Come may be greater if we keep quiet about our good deeds.
4. We show Hashem that we acted l'shem shamayim – for His sake and not for any gratitude, honour or recompense from other people. This in turn strengthens our bond with Him, which is the greatest pleasure.

The following story illustrates the benefits of not revealing our good deeds to others:

In the city of Tzfat there once lived an extremely pious and humble Jew. He reached such a high level of purity that he merited a visit from Eliyahu HaNavi. One night as he was reciting Tikun Chatzot (the lamentation over the destruction of the Bet Hamikdash that is recited at midnight), Eliyahu appeared and offered to reveal to him secrets of the Torah. But there was one condition. This man had to share with Eliyahu a particular good deed that he did on the day of his Barmitzvah. That good deed was so special that it gave the man sufficient merits to earn the visit from Eliyahu HaNavi that night. The man refused to reveal his deed. The good deed that he did was l'shem shamayim (for the sake of Heaven) and he wanted to keep it a secret, between him and Hashem. The man was willing to forfeit the opportunity to learn the secrets of the Torah for the sake of keeping his mitzva private. Eliyahu was forced to return to Heaven. There was a huge tumult in Heaven that night. How could this person pass up the opportunity to learn with Eliyahu HaNavi? His purity and piety was awesome. It was decided that Eliyahu should return the next night to teach him deep secrets of the Torah, despite the man's refusal to reveal the nature of his good deed. The man became a hidden tzaddik. When he died, his reward was that his soul would be re-incarnated as the Baal Shem Tov.

Let's try something this week:

1. Remember that Hashem knows our true motives behind our mitzva performance. Try to act honestly and fear Him, especially in cases such as giving advice, and other cases where it would be easy to hide our true intentions.
2. Look out for opportunities to do hidden good deeds. Celebrate the benefit of doing good deeds secretly and keeping them simply between us and Hashem.