

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Sh'mini (Vayikra 9:1–11:47)
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Sh'mini – Keeping quiet

In this week's Parsha of Sh'mini, we read about the tragedy of the death of Aharon's two oldest sons, Nadav and Avihu. They took it upon themselves to enter the kodosh hakedoshim, the holiest part of the Mishkan, to make an offering to Hashem. However, their offering was not in accordance with Hashem's instructions. They were punished with death. A fire jumped out and consumed them.

Though there are numerous lessons and commentaries on this incident, let's focus on Aharon's response to the death of his sons. In Vayikra (9:3) it says:

“...and Aharon was silent”

Remarkably, it seems from his silence that Aharon was able to accept the death of his sons with total equanimity. He did not cry out in distress or complain to Hashem. Rashi¹ explains that Hashem rewarded Aharon for his silence by addressing him exclusively in relation to the prohibition against Kohanim drinking wine before serving in the Mishkan.

The commentaries suggest that Aharon was punished with the death of his sons due to his role in the creation of the golden calf. But ultimately this falls within the very difficult question of why bad things happen to good people and why there is suffering in this world. How was Aharon able to remain silent in the face of such a terrible tragedy? His reaction seems incomprehensible to us!

Silence in the face of tragedy and/or punishment is a feature of 'hod' (submission) which is the Kabbalistic sephira that Aharon was renowned for. What can we learn from Aharon's behaviour? None of us are anywhere near the madrega (level) of Aharon. We could not possibly be expected to remain silent in similar circumstances. However, we often face situations where it is tempting to say something, even though we know deep down that silence is the most appropriate response.

Consider the following two scenarios (both of which are based on true stories):

Scenario 1: Simon and Bruria had been dating for a while. Tonight, he was going to meet her family for the first time. Bruria came from a very traditional family. Simon was not blessed with a religious upbringing. Bruria's father assumed that Simon could not speak Yiddish. He made a disparaging comment about Simon to Bruria's mother in Yiddish in Simon's earshot. The comment was said partially in jest, but it was hurtful. Unbeknownst to Bruria's father, Simon was fluent in Yiddish. Simon was tempted to answer back. His mind flooded with ideas for witty comments that would let Bruria's father know that he understood what he had said. But Simon decided that the sensible thing to do was to remain silent. Simon and Bruria ended up getting married and Simon became very close to his father-in-law. Simon had managed to stay silent and overcome his desire to make a comment. He made the right choice.

Scenario 2²: After many years of marriage, a couple remained childless. They went to Rav Chaim Kanievsky for advice. He advised them to ask for a bracha from someone who was publicly embarrassed but did not answer back. Rav Kanievsky explained that such a person is a pillar of the world, and Hashem listens to them. This type of person has the ability to give a blessing just like a Tzaddik. When attending a wedding, the childless couple saw a lady being harshly and unfairly criticised in public. The lady could easily have answered back and explained why she was in the right, however she chose to remain silent. The childless couple asked her for a bracha. As the story goes, they were blessed with a child that year.

¹ Rashi's commentary to Vayikra 10:3 in our Parasha.

² Heard from R' Fishel Schachter and R' Yonasan Schwartz.

How can we find the amazing self-discipline to stay silent when we are criticised? This can be particularly challenging if we feel that we were wrongly accused or if we have the perfect come-back line. Perhaps we can learn a technique from David Hamelech. In the Book of Shmuel Bet, we learn about David Hamelech fleeing from his son Avshalom, who is seeking to claim the throne. While on his way, David Hamelech comes across Shimi ben Gera, from the family of Shaul (the previous King of Israel):

'King David came to Bachurim and a man from the family of the house of Shaul came out, his name was Shimi ben Gera and he was cursing...

Avishai ben Tzruria said to the king: "Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king? Please let me go over to him and remove his head!"

*The king said: "...let him curse **because Hashem has surely said to him to curse David [me]. We don't have the right to question this behaviour.... Leave him alone and let him curse because **Hashem has told him to do so.*****" (Shmuel II 15:5-11)

Shimi cursed the king of Israel. He was guilty of treason and deserved to be put to death³. How could David restrain himself from responding in the heat of the moment? David realised that everything is from Hashem. If he was being cursed there must have been a good reason.

We can learn a lot from David Hamelech's attitude. Instead of being angry at the person who is upsetting us, we can try to remind ourselves that this person is simply a messenger from Hashem. We should focus on **ourselves** and try to understand the message that Hashem is sending us personally rather than concerning ourselves with the other person. We should try to detach ourselves from our ego and instead try to focus on the actual words that the person is saying and think objectively about the message and how it might apply to us. We should also look upon it as a test from Hashem to see whether we can restrain ourselves and overcome negative middot such as anger.

The Gemara (Gittin 36b) says the following: *"Our Rabbis taught: those who are insulted but do not insult, who hear themselves criticised and do not answer back, who act through love and rejoice in suffering, of them the verse says "And they who love Him [i.e. Hashem] are as the sun when it goes forth in its might (Shoftim 5:31)".*

Someone who has the self-restraint to keep quiet in the face of unjustified accusations is as mighty as the sun! This is a very difficult level to achieve, but something to work towards.

By answering back, we might achieve immediate gratification by defending ourselves or letting off steam. However, by remaining silent, we may avoid a larger dispute and ultimately help to bring peace to the world. Practically speaking, by not responding we can often shorten the time of the unpleasant confrontation. If we don't react, the other person will often lose the impetus to continue. Our silence also demonstrates faith in Hashem - that He sent us this message for a reason, that He will recognise and reward our restraint, and ultimately that everything is from Him and is all for the best.

Let's try something this week:

1. When we are next criticised unfairly or have the opportunity to make the perfect retort, let's try to make the effort to hold ourselves back and remain silent.
2. Remember that everything comes from Hashem. Instead of being angry at the person, we can use our silence to turn the focus on ourselves and try to understand what we might have done to deserve such treatment, or what we can learn. We can also feel better knowing that our silence will probably shorten any confrontation.
3. Every time we do manage to stay silent, we should remind ourselves that we have just shown emunah in Hashem.
4. If we do respond, we should communicate appropriately and calmly. If we avoid focusing on the other person and bring Hashem into the picture, we can minimise ego clashes that lead to inflammation.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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³ In fact, on David's death bed he advised his son Shlomo to punish Shimi when Shlomo became king. The commentators explain that this was for Shimi's benefit. David wanted him to be punished in this world and not in the World to Come. The Midrash teaches us that the righteous Mordechai ultimately descended from Shimi.

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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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