

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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

Bechukotai – The intrinsic value of every human being

This week's Parasha of Bechukotai contains the tochacha – the terrible list of curses that are inflicted on the Jewish people when they do not live up their obligations as Hashem's Chosen People. Immediately following this section is the portion dealing with Arachin (valuations). If someone wished to donate the 'value' of a person to the Beit Hamikdash, the Torah prescribes the amount that is to be donated. It is a fixed value based on gender and age. There is no variability with regard to other factors such as a person's earning capacity or commercial value.

A question might be asked: why is this portion of Arachin placed straight after the Tochacha? The Kotzker Rebbe¹ explains that after we read the list of curses, the Jewish people may begin to lose faith in themselves and their self-worth. They may feel depressed after realising how many of the curses have already come to fruition, or they may become fearful of the future. This passage dealing with Arachin reassures us that we all have an intrinsic, eternal value in the eyes of Hashem.² This powerful message can serve as a strengthener to help all of us through difficult times.

It is important to note that the Torah prescribes a *fixed* value to human beings. This might be different to what we might apply ourselves. If we were to be asked to calculate the value of another human being, we might assign a varying value based on what we believe is important. For instance, some people might choose financial worth. In the “Top 200 Rich List” financial journalists try to estimate the net worth of the nation's richest people.

This raises many questions - is Bill Gates worth more than an unknown beggar? What about someone that can offer an important contribution to society? Is a scientist who is about to discover a cure for cancer of more value than a thief? What about a Torah scholar compared to a hedonist? An elderly patient compared to a young baby?

In reality, hospitals and governments have to frequently make such difficult decisions about prioritising life when they allocate scarce resources. If a hospital can only perform one life saving operation at a time, and they are presented with two patients that need the same operation, who will they choose? Hospital ethics committees regularly grapple with these difficult and painful decisions.

¹ Rabbi Menachem Mendel Morgensztern of Kotzk (1787–1859).

² See “The Parsha Potpourri” on Parashat Bechukotai by Rabbi Ozer Alport - <https://aish.com/151292195/>

However, apart from such unique situations, it is not usually our role to measure another person's worth and apportion varying values to people. And we learn from the portion of Arachin that the Torah does not assign variable values to different people in this manner. Rather, the Torah sets fixed values for all humans. Any two people that are the same gender and in the same age category will have the same value. This demonstrates that we are all equally valid and valuable, because we all contain a spark of Hashem, and we all have unlimited potential.

We also learn this message from the halacha that it is strictly forbidden to take any action that can shorten someone's life, even if that person is a 'gossess' (someone that is very close to death). Any action taken to hasten their death is considered murder³. Hashem values every moment of life. It is impossible for us to ascribe an accurate value to someone's life.

The following story⁴ highlights how outward appearances are in no way representative of a person's value and how dangerous it can be to presume another's worth. The famous Rabbi Aryeh Levine, known to be a saintly individual, used to walk past a particular elderly beggar on his way home every day. He made it a practice to give the beggar a regular donation. One day, after this had continued for some time, the beggar asked Rabbi Levine to follow him to a secluded hovel in a remote part of the neighbourhood. Rabbi Levine then witnessed an amazing sight. Apparently, the beggar had been leading a daily learning session in a very esoteric and difficult book of kabbalah and the secret group had finally reached the end of the sefer. Rabbi Levine was privileged to join them for the siyum. The beggar passed away very soon after the siyum. Apparently his job in this world was finally complete. From outward appearances many people might have presumed that he was just a simple beggar, and not realised that he was actually a hidden tzaddik.

The above story highlights that as mere mortals with limited vision and understanding, we have no way of knowing a person's true worth or how much they still have left to contribute to this world. Each of us has our own unique challenges and our own unique tafkid or purpose in life. Hashem judges us by how we measure up compared to our own potential. By prescribing the same value to each person, the Torah is teaching us that it is not for us to measure or apportion value to another human being. That is not our role. We each have value and everyone's life is infinitely precious.

Let's try something this week:

1. Notice if we are judging or comparing people. Do we make assumptions about other people's worth? We can strive to catch ourselves in the act of comparing or valuing and then remind ourselves that this is Hashem's role, not ours.
2. If we are going through a difficult time in our lives, and our feeling of self-worth is low, remember the teaching of the Kotzker Rebbe. We each have an eternal, intrinsic value in the eyes of Hashem.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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³ Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 339:1.

⁴ This story was published in "A Tzaddik in our Time" by Simcha Raz.