

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם**“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”**

(Mishlei 3:17)

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

Balak – Hidden favours

If you do a favour for a friend, is it better to tell them, or to keep it a secret? What do you think?

In this week's Parasha of Balak, we read about the attempts of Bilaam to curse Bnei Yisrael. Bilaam was a powerful sorcerer whose curses caused the downfall of entire nations. Balak, the king of Moab, hired Bilaam to help Moav dispose of Bnei Yisrael. However, despite numerous attempts, Hashem did not allow Bilaam to curse Bnei Yisrael. Each time Bilaam opened his mouth, beautiful verses of praise and blessing emanated from him. We even include one of these pasukim in our daily prayers.

During this entire episode Bnei Yisrael remain in the dark, totally oblivious to the miraculous manner in which Hashem is protecting his beloved people. If Hashem did not add this story to the Torah, we may never have found out what happened! It seems that Hashem *wanted* us to know.

A similar theme occurred near the end of last week's Parasha of Chukat. Shortly before the war with Sichon, the king of the Emorites, Bnei Yisrael sang a song of thanks and praise to Hashem and the miraculous well of water that followed them in the desert. It seems strange that the song is sung at this point, when the well has been with them for the past 40 years. The Midrash explains that the Emorites had planned a deadly ambush. Bnei Yisrael were passing through a deep gorge. The Emorites hid in caves at the top of the gorge, planning to throw large boulders onto the heads of Bnei Yisrael as they passed through. However, Hashem caused the two walls of the gorge to miraculously move together, crushing the Emorites to death. Bnei Yisrael remained ignorant of this miracle until Hashem caused the blood of the Emorites to flow down the gorge and into the well of water that followed Bnei Yisrael. Upon realising Hashem's kindness, Bnei Yisrael burst into a song of gratitude.

There is a psychological principle known as reciprocity. People generally do not like to feel indebted to others. If someone does us a favour, we naturally feel compelled to do them a favour back. For instance, if someone invites us for a Shabbat meal then we feel a sense of duty to invite them back because “we owe them”. Successful marketers often rely on this principle to encourage people to buy their product. If you receive a “free gift”, you are more likely to buy the product / give a donation / become a subscriber, out of a sense of reciprocity.

We can channel this natural trait of reciprocity for the good. If people do acts of goodness and kindness to us, this feeling of ‘owing’ another may encourage us to similarly respond in kind. This can increase the level of unity and brotherly love between us. One of the reasons given for the mitzvah of mishloach manot on Purim is that it increases peace and brotherly love. When we receive mishloach manot from a friend, we often feel obligated to reciprocate. We have probably all witnessed the resulting camaraderie (not to mention chaos!) from this intense and loving exchange on Purim.

Perhaps this aspect of human nature explains why Hashem informed us about His miraculous protection of us in relation to both Bilaam and the Emorites. When we hear about the kindnesses

that Hashem did for us, we feel His love more strongly and we have a stronger incentive to “pay Hashem back” through Torah learning and mitzvot.

Similarly, we might learn from this the benefits of telling another person when we perform a kindness for them. It can add to their feeling of goodwill towards us and create a positive cycle of giving.

On the other hand, Rav Avigdor Miller recommends, in his Ten Steps to Greatness, that we should do one *secret* act of kindness every day. This act should be secret, so as to ensure that the act is l’shem Shamayim – just between us and Hashem. It should not be performed in order to receive any benefit from the other person feeling appreciative or wanting to reciprocate.

In some cases, there may be drawbacks to sharing our act of chesed. There are other factors that need to be taken into account before deciding to inform the recipient of the kindness that was done for them. In particular:

- If the recipient found out that an act of kindness was done for them, it may cause them to feel indebted or embarrassed, especially if they cannot repay the favour.
- Informing the recipient about an act of kindness we did for them may come from a place of gaiva (pride or arrogance).

The above issues are relevant for mitzvot ben Adam l’Chavero (mitzvot between people). However, the analysis is different for mitzvot ben Adam l’Makom (between people and Hashem). What should we do in such cases – should we inform people about our mitzvot ben Adam l’Makom or should we keep them a secret?

On the one hand, keeping these ben Adam l’Makom mitzvot quiet can help to increase our anava (humility). On the other hand, publicising the mitzvah may encourage others to replicate the behaviour, by providing a positive example for other people to follow. This principle underlies the reason why Jewish tradition encourages the use of plaques to commemorate the people who generously donate towards the cost of building our communal facilities. We see these plaques everywhere: “This chair was proudly donated by...”. “This window was donated in loving memory of...”. “This toothpick was generously donated by...”. It may seem strange to publicise these acts of tzedakah, and yet these types of plaques are beneficial in motivating others to be equally generous. And perhaps it will also motivate those same people to donate again next time.

Ultimately, the decision of whether to publicise our mitzvot, or keep them quiet, involves a cost-benefit analysis. Each decision depends on our unique situation and the circumstances of the mitzva in question.

Let’s try something this week

1. Be aware of when we publicise our good deeds and when we don’t. Try to contemplate and make an active decision as to whether it is more beneficial to publicise each mitzva, or keep it quiet.
2. We can consider the following relevant factors in order to make a decision:
 - for mitzvot ben Adam l’Chavero: encouraging gratitude and reciprocity vs embarrassment and feelings of gaiva;
 - for mitzvot ben Adam l’Makom: encouraging the spiritual growth of others vs feelings of gaiva.