

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Vaera
January 2025 / Tevet 5785

darchai.noam@gmail.com
www.darchai-noam.com

How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Vaera – Fire and ice

In this week's Parasha of Vaera we read about seven of the ten plagues with which Hashem punished the Egyptians. Though even a simple reading of the pasukim demonstrates the miraculous nature of these plagues, the Midrashim reveal to us even more miraculous aspects.¹ One example of the many 'miracles within miracles' was the plague of hail, the last plague we read about this week. Inside each hailstone was fire. Thus, something that wasn't damaged by the hail was instead burnt by the fire!

The miraculous nature of the fiery hail is obvious. Fire and ice have opposing physical properties, which means that they cannot co-exist within the normal laws of nature. Either the fire should have melted the ice, or the ice should have extinguished the fire, or both. How were the fire and ice able to work together in harmony?²

The reason why such opposing forces of nature were able to co-exist is only because the fire and the ice were both serving Hashem's will. The fire and ice were both nullified in the presence of Hashem to the point where the difference between them became insignificant. By nullifying their nature to Hashem's will, they were thus able to co-exist in harmony.

We can learn a lesson from these hailstones to apply to our daily lives. There may be many people in our lives that we struggle to co-exist with. These may include people who have hurt us in some way, people with different political beliefs, people with different levels of religiosity or people with 'annoying habits'. In some cases, we may just have a personality clash with certain people even if we cannot identify a particular reason. Though it may be tempting to simply avoid these people, sometimes this is just not realistic or possible. Maybe they are our neighbour, or they sit next to us in shule. Maybe they are our work colleague or maybe they are members of our family.

How can we learn to co-exist with such people? Perhaps we can learn a lesson from the hail and fire. If we can focus on nullifying ourselves and our nature before Hashem, then the differences between us and our 'annoying acquaintance' can become much less significant and we may find it easier to co-exist in harmony. We might accomplish this by focusing on how great Hashem is and how insignificant we are in comparison. For example, the Rambam teaches that by studying Hashem's greatness, we develop an awe of Him as we realise how insignificant we are. When we see ourselves as insignificant, then by extension, our petty squabbles or the discomfort that we feel in the presence of an annoying neighbour may start to seem less significant as well.

Many of the great tzaddikim in Tanach had a healthy sense of humility and an understanding of how insignificant they were in comparison to Hashem. For example:

- Avraham: "I am but dust and ashes" (Breishit 18:27)
- Moshe and Aharon: "For what are we?" (Shmot 16:7-8)
- David HaMelech: "I am but a worm and not a man" (Tehillim 22:7)
- Yeshayahu: "I am a man of unclean lips" (Yeshayahu 6:5)
- Yirmiyahu: "I cannot speak, for I am a child" (Yirmiyahu 1:6)

¹ An excellent source to learn these Midrashim is the very readable "Let My Nation Go" by Yosef Deutsch.

² The following is based on an insight that I learnt from R' Dovid Tsap.

Genuine humility can be difficult to achieve. And ironically, working on our humility can lead us to feel pride in what we have accomplished. It's like the old joke about a man sitting in shule and trying to work on his humility. He would repeat to himself over and over again: "I'm a nothing. I'm a nothing". Another man thought this was a good idea. He sat down next to the first man and did the same thing. The first man looked at the second man with disdain and said: "Look who thinks he's a nothing!"

Focusing on our own insignificance and making ourselves 'batel' (nullified) can be difficult to do because it involves us reducing our own egos. In his third volume of "Bilvavi Mishkan Evneh", Rav Itamar Shwartz cites the example of Rav Yerucham Levovitz who consciously chose to practice being batel by deliberately doing something that he didn't want to do, or holding back from doing something that he wanted to do, five times every day. This is quite an advanced level and certainly not something to aim for at the start.

Perhaps we can apply this idea at our own level. Pirkai Avot teaches us that we should nullify our own desires when they are different from what Hashem wants.³ Almost every day things inevitably happen that do not go according to *our* plan. It might be a major event, or it might be a minor inconvenience. When things go wrong, we often feel annoyed or frustrated as a result. We might feel a sense of entitlement that things should go *our* way and feel offended that this entitlement has been derailed. When something does go wrong, we can try the avodah of consciously trying to nullify our sense of entitlement and just accept the situation. If Hashem has decreed that something should not go smoothly for us, then we can remind ourselves - who are we to disagree?

If we do this practice sincerely, and nullify our will before Hashem's Will, the Mishnah in Pirkai Avot teaches us that midah k'neged midah (measure for measure) Hashem will nullify the desires of others when they are inconsistent with what we want.

Nullifying our sense of entitlement and increasing our humility can help us get on with difficult people. It can also help us on the path to becoming great (like the tzaddikim listed above). And excitingly, it can even make us feel happier, as the following anecdote demonstrates:

Reuven was invited to Levi's wedding. When he arrived, he was very disappointed to see that he was placed on a 'bad table'.⁴ It was far from the head table and right near the band's noisy loudspeaker. Reuven considered himself a close friend of Levi, and he felt that he was entitled to a better seat. Shimon was seated at the same table as Reuven. Unlike Reuven, Shimon did not feel that he was entitled to a better seat. He was so grateful to be invited to share in the simcha, and he felt happy just to be there. Reuven had a miserable time at the wedding while Shimon had a wonderful time.⁵

Let's try something this week:

1. When we are forced to interact with 'difficult people', we can strive to remember the lesson of the hail and the fire. If we consciously focus on how insignificant we are in comparison to Hashem this might help to make it easier for us to forgo our expectations, competitiveness or anger and just learn to accept.
2. When things don't go our way, instead of feeling frustrated or angry, try to remember that Hashem makes sure that we get what we really need and what we deserve, not what we think we deserve or what we feel entitled to.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

* To subscribe please email darchai.noam@gmail.com

³ Avot 2:4.

⁴ Outside of Israel the seating arrangement for guests at a wedding is usually planned in advance. In Israel guests at a wedding are usually not assigned seats. Everyone just sits where they like. This is not a bad idea at all as it can save a lot of heartache! (Except when you accidentally sit in the only seats that are assigned – that belonging to the bride and groom! My son and I actually did this by accident at a wedding, soon after we made Aliya. Oops!)

⁵ This story is based on a true episode, and no doubt occurs on many occasions.