

# DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

## “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Acharai Mot Kedoshim  
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

### Acharai Kedoshim – Honesty in business dealings

This week's Parsha of Kedoshim instructs us to be holy like Hashem. Then it lists a plethora of mitzvot. One of these mitzvot is the requirement to have honest weights and measures:

*You shall have correct scales, correct weights, a correct ephah [a measure of volume] and a correct hin [another measure of volume], I am Hashem your G-d Who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” (Vayikra 19:36)*

This prohibition requires storekeepers to keep accurate scales so that when a customer purchases for example a kilo of apples, they actually receive a full kilo. This mitzva falls within the broader obligation to be honest in our business dealings.

Why does the pasuk then conclude by referring to Hashem bringing us out of the land of Egypt? The Midrash<sup>1</sup> states that we were brought out of Egypt on condition that we accept this mitzva of honest measures, and therefore whoever denies this mitzva denies the redemption from Egypt.

Why does the pasuk include the words “I am Hashem”? Generally, customers do not usually have the ability to check the weights and measures of the storekeeper. They must rely on the storekeeper's honesty. The storekeeper may therefore think that he can get away with inaccurate scales because no-one is watching. This sin reveals not only a dishonesty to one's fellow man, but also a failure to believe that Hashem is always watching. The pasuk may mention Hashem to remind us that Hashem is always present, and thereby deter storekeepers from committing this sin.

In Mesillat Yesharim<sup>2</sup>, the Ramchal discusses similar types of sins that appear to be hidden. Other people may be unaware of the sins and thus it may be more tempting to commit them. He notes that it is so easy for a person to deceive himself with regards to these sins and thus fall. Most people are not overt thieves. Yet these same people are often tainted by theft in the course of their business dealings by allowing themselves to gain through their neighbours' loss. They justify their behaviour, saying “business is different”. However, the Ramchal states that any form of deceit in business dealings is forbidden. He quotes the Gemara<sup>3</sup> stating that the punishment for dishonest weights and measures is more severe than the punishment for illicit relations. The Gemara explains that it is practically impossible to find all the members of the public that have been defrauded. And since one of the crucial steps for teshuva in this case is to repay the amount stolen, complete repentance is almost impossible.

The Ramchal also brings the following pasuk which describes people who have dishonest measures:

*“You shall have a full and honest weight and a full and honest ephah measure...for whoever perpetrates such injustice, is an abomination to Hashem your G-d.” (Devarim 25:15-16)*

The following stories relate to this area of honest business relations.

A story is told of the Chofetz Chaim hiring a wagon. The wagon driver set off through the countryside. At one point, the wagon driver pulled over and asked his passenger to please wait for a moment. He

<sup>1</sup> Sifra.

<sup>2</sup> In the beginning of Chapter 11.

<sup>3</sup> Baba Batra 88b.

had noticed a wheat field with an abundance of wheat. "I'm sure the owner won't mind if I just take a bundle or two for myself". As the wagon driver crept up to the field the Chofetz Chaim shouted "Quick! Someone is watching!" The wagon driver sprinted back to the wagon and drove off in a rush. But as the wagon pulled away from the field, the wagon driver noticed that no-one else was around. "Why did you tell me that someone is watching?" he asked, "I can't see anyone!" "Someone is always watching", replied the Chofetz Chaim. "Hashem is always watching".

Another story is told<sup>4</sup> of a dreadful smallpox epidemic in the Jewish ghetto of Krakow about 300 years ago. The elders of the community decided to make a "dream query" – a kabbalistic request for Heavenly information that is provided through the medium of a dream. The answer was that Shlomo the butcher should lead the prayers in front of the entire community. The elders went to visit Shlomo and asked him to come to the shule. Shlomo was embarrassed, he couldn't even read properly. Shlomo stood on the bimah, nervous. Then he suddenly ran away from the shule. He returned a few minutes later with a wheelbarrow containing his butcher scales. With tears in his eyes he said "Here G-d, take the scales, that must be why you wanted me to lead the prayers, right? So take the scales and heal the children!" That evening, the sick children started to heal. The elders wondered what was so special about Shlomo's scales. On investigation, they discovered that all of the other scales in the ghetto were slightly inaccurate and were only checked occasionally. In contrast, Shlomo carefully checked his scales twice a day. When asked why, he stated simply "That is what Hashem wants". According to the legend, these scales were on display in the Krakow synagogue until they were destroyed during World War II.

The story is brought in the Gemara<sup>5</sup> of Abba Shaul ben Botnit who was very particular about accurately measuring wine for his customers. The customers did not want to wait for the froth that was left over in the measuring cups to settle. However Abba Shaul felt that the froth did not belong to him, so he collected it and eventually accumulated 300 jugs of wine. His colleague R. Elazar ben R Tzadok experienced a similar issue with the oil he sold. The customers did not want to wait for every single drop to pour from the measuring cups into their bottles. But R' Elazar was reluctant to keep these last few drops for himself. He collected them and after time found that he had 300 jugs of oil. The two men brought these jars to the Bet Hamikdash. The Sages told them that according to the law, they could keep the wine and oil because the customers preferred not to wait and thereby renounced all claims. However, the two men did not want to take something that did not clearly belong to them. They were advised to donate the oil and wine to projects that benefited the community.

This requirement for honest business dealings extends well beyond overt dishonesty. Many of us are guilty of similar seemingly small acts of inappropriate behaviour that other people do not notice – such as using office supplies for personal use, making long distance calls from the office phone without permission and spending time for which we are paid a salary on personal matters. However, any such cheating reflects the same fundamental flaw in our avodat Hashem - a lack of yirat Shamayim. In effect, we are placing our fear of man over our fear of Hashem.

Let's end with a joke. A teacher called in a boy's parents for a talk. The boy had a bad habit of stealing pencils from his classmates. "I don't understand why he is doing this," said the father. "I bring home more than enough pencils from the office for him to use."

Let's try something this week:

1. Let's try to focus on honesty in our business dealings, particularly on those seemingly insignificant things that may escape other people's attention.
2. Cheating is most tempting when other people are unaware. Let's try to remember that Hashem is always watching us. Learning mussar can help to strengthen our awareness of this reality.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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<sup>4</sup> Seen in the Lamplighter, 19 February 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Beitza 29a.