

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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

Mishpatim – The ear that listens

This week's Parsha of Mishpatim begins by teaching us about Jewish slaves. In certain circumstances, a Jew was forced to sell himself as a slave. Generally, the sale was only valid for a maximum of six years and in the seventh year the slave would go free.

However, if the slave did not want to go free, his period of slavery could be extended as long as certain procedures were followed.¹ First, the master would need to bring the slave to the Bet Din to try to convince the slave not to extend his period of slavery. If the slave insisted on extending his slavery, then the master would need to bore a hole through his ear as a sign of continuous slavery.² (As an aside, that is one reason why earrings for men are frowned upon, as they are considered a sign of slavery.)

Why is it specifically the ear that is used for this sign? Rashi explains that the ear heard at Har Sinai that Bnei Yisrael were to be slaves to Hashem.³ A person who wanted to remain as a slave to a Jewish master ignored the fact that Hashem should be our only master. Ideally, we should be slaves to Hashem and no-one else. Since this person's ear failed to hear this message at Har Sinai, it is therefore appropriate for his ear to be pierced.

Interestingly, Rav Zev Leff questions why the outer ear is pierced? We don't hear with our outer ear, we hear with our ear drums. Therefore, it would seem more appropriate to pierce the ear drum! Rav Leff explains that the outer ear actually has an important role as a funnel that captures sound waves and directs them towards our inner ear so that we can hear the message. In essence, the outer ear directs the external messages, ensuring that they reach us internally and do not just pass us by. Thus, the outer ear is the appropriate part of the body to be pierced because it failed to direct the message internally to him. This slave heard the message that was given at Har Sinai, but the words missed their mark. Instead of treating those words as personally relevant, the slave considered that the message was meant for someone else.

Often people hear criticism and assume that it is not meant for them. For instance, if the criticism is directed at a group, they assume that it is meant for other people in the group. If a co-worker is criticised, others are happy to fly under the radar. We generally dislike criticism and we set up defence mechanisms to protect our fragile egos. But if we truly want to reach our potential, we should actually embrace constructive criticism. Whenever we hear any form of criticism, even if it is not directed at us personally, we should consider how it might apply to us and how we can grow from the advice.

Rabbi Yechezkel Levenstein⁴ tells a famous story that demonstrates this idea in a humorous way. Rabbi Levenstein was riding in a taxi in Israel. The secular taxi driver told him that he would like to share an interesting story. The taxi driver told him that he and his friends went travelling around the world after their army service. They were camping in the jungle in Africa one night when they were woken by a terrible scream. A large snake had wrapped itself around one of his friends and was squeezing him to death. They

¹ Shmot 21:5-6.

² The period of slavery would only extend until the next Jubilee year, at which time all Jewish slaves go free.

³ Vayikra 25:55.

⁴ 1895 - 1974, he was the mashgiach of the Mir Yeshiva and the leader of several yeshivas in Europe, America, and Israel.

tried everything but they could not dislodge the snake. Eventually, one of the friends told the guy being squeezed to say Shema. Though they were irreligious, they knew the words to the Shema. The taxi driver's friend called out the words of Shema with the last breath that he had. As soon as he said the last word of the pasuk, the snake released its grip and slithered away. The guy survived. This incident had such a profound effect on the driver's friend that he became religious. "That's an amazing story" said Rabbi Levenstein. "But what about you? How were you impacted by this event?" "Oh, I wasn't affected at all" replied the taxi driver. "It didn't happen to me, it happened to my friend!"

There are no coincidences in life. We can learn personal lessons from every message that we hear. Even if we experience or hear messages that seem irrelevant to us personally, there is a reason why Hashem wants us to hear those messages. In these cases, we may need to put in effort to work out the relevance to us. In the Aseret Hadibrot, which we just heard recited last week in shul, we learnt about a number of sins that may not appear at first glance to be relevant to our daily life. But they can actually be quite relevant if we delve a little deeper. For example:

- We are commanded not to murder. Hopefully this is not relevant to any of us! However, our sages teach us that embarrassing someone is like murdering them.⁵ Causing a person's blood to drain from their face is considered akin to shedding blood. Thus, the instruction "Thou shalt not murder" should cause us to examine our actions to determine whether we have caused embarrassment.
- We are commanded not to steal.⁶ Hopefully none of us have held up a bank! Yet we can learn not to steal other things, like people's time. Arriving late to a meeting or an appointment is stealing someone's time. Time is harder to pay back than money! And what about using the work phone for long distance phone calls without permission? Or taking stationary from the office for personal use?

[Which reminds me of a joke: Johnny was constantly stealing pencils from his classmates at school. The situation was getting worse and worse. Eventually, the teacher called in Johnny's parents to discuss the matter. Johnny's father said: "I really don't understand why Johnny is doing this. I bring home as many pencils as he could possibly need from the office".]

- We are commanded not to worship idols. Idol worship does not appear to be a problem today. However, the Gemara⁷ compares one who gets angry to one who worships idols. Getting angry is in effect worshipping ourselves! We are denying that Hashem runs the world and that He knows what is for the best. This is like a subtle form of idol worship. In our anger, we are in essence worshipping our own egos.

In addition, even though we do not worship idols in the classic sense of the word, most of us worship a form of idol – whether it's money, possessions or celebrities. Whenever we ascribe power to someone or something in this world, without recognising that Hashem is behind that person or thing, this is like a form of idol worship.

Let's try something this week:

1. When we hear someone else being criticised, let's try to work out how the criticism might be personally relevant to us. What would Hashem want us to learn from it?
2. When we are exposed to a situation or message that does not seem relevant to us, we should put in some effort to work out how we can learn and grow from this message. We can use our outer ear to funnel the relevant lesson down into our inner ear, and from there into our minds, hearts and souls.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledger

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⁵ Gemara, Baba Metzia 58b.

⁶ The reference to stealing in the Aseret Hadibrot is actually a reference to kidnapping. The prohibition against stealing property appears in Vayikra 19:11.

⁷ Shabbat 105b.