

אור פני משה

שיחות מוסר על התורה

מאת הרה"ג ר' משה אליעזר רבינוביץ זצ"ל

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פרשת וישלח

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לעילוי נשמת
הרה"ג ר' מרדכי דוד זצוק"ל קוקיס
בן יבדל"ח הרה"ג
ר' שלמה בן-ציון שליט"א
נפטר ט"ו בסלו תש"פ

פרשת וישלח

וַיִּצַו אֹתָם לֵאמֹר כֹּה תֹאמְרוּן לְאֶדְנִי לַעֲשׂוּ כֹּה אָמַר עַבְדְּךָ יַעֲקֹב עִם לָבָן גִּרְתִּי וְאַחַר עַד
עָתָה: וַיְהִי לִי שׂוֹר וְחֹמֹר צֹאן וְעֶבֶד וְשִׁפְחָה (בראשית ל"ב ה'-ו')

And he commanded them saying, 'So shall you say to my brother, Eisav, "So says your servant Yaakov, 'With Lavan I have lived, and I delayed until now. And there was to me oxen and donkeys, sheep, servants, and maidservants' ".

As preparation for his encounter with Eisav Harasha, Yaakov Avinu sent a delegation of messengers to present Eisav with a substantial gift. Along with the gift, Yaakov prepared the messengers with a specific message to communicate to Eisav. *עם לבן גרתי... ויהי לי שור וחמור צאן /I have live with Lavan, and I have gotten cattle, donkeys and sheep...* The question is, what point was Yaakov conveying to Eisav? Why would it matter to Eisav where Yaakov was living until then, or whether or not he had acquired animals for himself? Certainly, the actual gift 'spoke' directly to Eisav's heart, as did the threat which Yaakov later conveyed to him when he mentioned his meeting with the *malach*. Yaakov was saying, 'I have defeated *malachim* – watch out!' We can understand how that would make an impression upon Eisav. Why, though, was Yaakov informing of him the seemingly irrelevant facts about his own travails and about his livestock?

A Friendly Word

Friendly, Brotherly Conversation

The Ohr Hachaim explains that the information Yaakov was conveying was indeed unnecessary for any practical purpose. Why then was Yaakov telling Eisav these tidings? The answer is that when brothers or friends meet each other, there does not need to be any reason for them to relate their personal affairs to one another. It is natural for two brothers to simply 'shmooz' with each other.

'How is your family? Are your children adjusting to the new neighborhood you moved to?'

'Boruch Hashem, things are working out! And what about you? How is your job going? Are you getting customers?'

By 'shmoozing' with Eisav about his affairs, Yaakov was showing Eisav that he felt a friendliness and a brotherly kinship with him. By doing so, Eisav would begin to feel a friendliness toward Yaakov, rather than the hatred he had felt until then.¹

Taking an Interest in Those Around Us

This idea is important for our own lives. We must give attention to those around us, by taking an interest in their wellbeing, and even sharing some of our own affairs to the extent that is possible. This creates friendships and relationships between people. This is by no means an issue of דברים בטילים/*pointless words* or wasting time. On the contrary, it is an important factor in the *mitzvah* of ואהבת /*loving a fellow Jew*. This practice is direct fulfilment of the *mitzvah* of *chesed* for another Jew.

¹ In truth, Yaakov felt no such affinity toward Eisav Harasha, but he wished to convey the message that he did feel this way, so that Eisav would end his feeling of hatred toward Yaakov.

Our *gedolim* were particularly meticulous in this area. Although they were generally so sparing in their words, ever mindful to speak only of matters pertaining to Torah and *mitzvos*, this did not come at the expense of putting another Jew at ease and inquiring after his wellbeing. On the contrary, they viewed that as a great *mitzvah* in itself.

My father zt"l used to pay a visit to Rav Moshe Feinstein zt"l every few weeks. Each time he would come, he would have a list of shailos that he had accumulated. My father did not wish to burden Rav Moshe or take up his time, and he would be ready to get right down to 'business'. Rav Moshe, however, would not have it that way. He would insist on inquiring about my father's wellbeing, the family, the shul, etc. After a few minutes, my father would again express his discomfort about troubling Rav Moshe. Again, though, Rav Moshe would insist on discussing whatever issues were on my father's mind, all before my father could ask him the shailos that he had.

Each time my father would return from those trips, he would be on a 'high'. He would often exclaim how people think Rav Moshe's greatness lay in his hasmadah and in his phenomenal Torah knowledge and genius. "All of that is true," my father would say. "He is a tremendous gadol in those areas. But his greatness in his middos surpasses those areas. There is absolutely no one whose middos compare to those of Rav Moshe."

Even people who were seen by most as nudniks, best avoided whenever possible, were accepted warmly by Rav Moshe. He would treat them with respect and answer their questions with warmth and endless patience.

When I lived in Eretz Yisroel, I used to visit Rav Shach zt"l to discuss different issues that came up. Rav Shach treated me in much the same manner that Rav Moshe treated my father. Despite Rav Shach's enormous greatness in Torah and his position as the leader of the Torah world, he treated me with warmth and respect. He encouraged me to ask my questions, and he took each one seriously, discussing it with me at length.

The practice of saying a friendly word to another person can make the difference for a person's mood for an entire day.

Chaim is going through different issues in his life, and he is in low, downtrodden spirits. As he is leaving shul in the morning, Reuven walks by and gives him a cheerful 'good morning'. He briefly asks him how he is doing and wishes him a good day. They then part ways.

Reuven does not realize it, but he has indeed just caused Chaim to have a good day. After that brief interchange, Chaim feels so much better about himself and his life. True, his problems did not disappear, but the recognition that he received from another person breathed a spirit of life into him and gave him the energy and vigor that he needs to be able to face the issues.

The Effect of a Negative Word

Conversely, an unkind word can negatively impact a person's mood for an entire day. When one individual fails to give the proper recognition or sensitivity to another, it can be a devastating blow to the recipient. At times, it may take even an entire day or more for the recipient to recover from this blow and get past his hurt feeling. Until then, the recipient will not accomplish what he should be, whether in his learning, his *parnassah*, or any other endeavor in which he is involved. Indeed, Rav Nochum Partzovitz zt"l used to stress that a person's face is not in his own possession, but is *רשות הרבים/public property*. This means that a person does not have a personal right to have his facial expression give off the impression that he is in a bad mood. His bad mood is his own private business, and displaying it will only cause others

to lose their own good spirits. As the Chovos Halevavos writes, a person should have דאגתו בלבו וצהלתו בפניו/His worry is in his heart, while he maintains an appearance of joy on his face.²

A Positive Word is פיקוח נפש/Saving a Life

It would seem to me that offering a friendly and kind word to another Jew can at times be equivalent to פיקוח נפש/saving another Jew's life. Where can we see this concept expressed?

In the well-known story of Choni Ham'agail, the Gemara tells us that Choni fell asleep for 70 full years. When he awoke, he tried telling people whom he was, but he could not convince anyone. Her felt completely friendless in the world, and he asked Hashem that he should die, uttering the famous words או חבירותא או מיתותא/Either a friend or death.

We learn in this story that when a person experiences a feeling of being friendless, it is an experience worse even than death. It follows, then, that we should react to such a situation with the same urgency and severity as we do when there is a situation of actual פיקוח נפש.

What happens in a shul, should there chas v'shalom be an occurrence of someone present who falls into cardiac arrest? Those present immediately drop what they are doing, and they switch to 'emergency mode'. Hatzalah is called, and all efforts are made to bring the person to medical assistance without delay.

When there is someone who is feeling lonely and low-spirited, it is the same level of emergency! The individual is longing for another person to share a word of encouragement and friendship. If he does not receive that kind word that he desperately needs, his pain is worse than death, as we learn in the above story of Choni. If so, we must react with the same purpose and urgency as we do when there is a situation of an actual life-threatening danger.

Let us see to reach out to those around us with words of friendship and sensitivity and let us do our best to keep the spirits of those around us uplifted, rather than the opposite.

Friendly Discussion Causes Machlokes to be Averted

Aside from the positive relationships and feelings of goodwill that result from friendly conversation, much harm can be avoided through it as well. Many times, a machlokes which arises between two sides is a result of neither side really hearing the reasoning of the other side. Matters will then escalate until the tension reaches a full-blown controversy, often with disastrous effects. If they would have only exchanged a few friendly words directly to each other at the outset, there would have been an understanding between them. At times, one side never even meant to say what it is being accused of saying, but something entirely different. Through speaking things over between them, these points can be clarified.

The rosh yeshiva of Mir, Rav Lazer Yudel Finkel, instituted that after davening on Shabbos morning in the yeshiva, the entire hanhalla of the yeshiva would assemble in his house for a small kiddush. There was not much served – some grape juice and a little cake – but the purpose was not the food. In his great wisdom, Rav Lazer Yudel was ensuring that there should be an atmosphere of shalom between all the different members of the hanhalla. With three different roshei yeshiva and various rebbeim, there could be potential for machlokes to arise regarding all sorts of issues. The kiddush

² This does not mean that a person should not discuss his issues with another person; on the contrary, the Gemara tells us דאגה בלב איש ישיחה/When there is worry in a man's heart, let him converse about it to others. However, there is a difference between concentrating directly on one's worries in the course of a focused conversation, which is indeed advisable and commendable, or allowing them to take over oneself to the point that his face has a constant worried, haggard look. That is to be avoided when possible so as not to adversely affect the spirits of those in one's vicinity.

kept the lines of communication open amongst everyone, and a beautiful spirit of shalom was able to be maintained.

Dealing Properly with All People

Dealing with the Crooked Lavan for 20 Years

The Ohr Hachaim gives an additional answer to the original question. He had asked, what was Yaakov conveying to Eisav by telling him that he had lived with Lavan? The answer to this is based the fact that Lavan, rather than simply the resident swindler in his hometown of Aram, was actually world-famous for his treachery and deceitfulness. It was well known in all the nearby countries – and this information had surely reached Eisav as well – that Lavan was a crook from whom one was best off simply keeping away. Any dealing with him was bound to end in loss, after which Lavan would manage to twist the story in a way that all the blame would be placed on the other party. Anyone who did need to have dealings with him would do his best to keep them as minimal as possible.

With this 'stellar reputation' that Lavan cultivated about himself, it was certainly out of the question for one to stay in Lavan's home for any amount of time. Even living on his block was difficult; let alone in his house!

Can we imagine running a business together with a partner whose goal is to trip us at every turn? One who each time that we would get up, would trip us again? How long could a person go on in such a way? We would leave such a situation, rightfully so, as soon as we possibly could.

This was what Yaakov was telling Eisav: With all of Lavan's trickery, he had lived with Lavan in his home for 20 years! Lavan was constantly trying to trip him at every turn, yet Yaakov took it in stride and did not allow his own mood or character to become affected. Not only did Yaakov manage to deal with him, but they parted on good terms with each other. True, Lavan chased after Yaakov, and as was his practice, hurled many baseless charges and accusations at Yaakov. However, even then, Yaakov calmed him down to the point that they parted on friendly terms.

Certainly, an individual who is capable of surviving through such an existence for a full 20 years, possesses a tremendously refined and elevated character. Indeed, when we hear of such a person, we are deeply moved by his tremendous patience and his refined character, untainted by the low behavior to which he is exactly exposed. In the words of the Ohr Hachaim, והדברים אלו יתיכו לב אבן / *These words will melt a heart of stone*. When Eisav would hear of his brother Yaakov's magnificent character, surely even the heartless, impenetrable Eisav would be influenced to have an appreciation and a love for Yaakov, rather than the hatred and enmity he had felt until then.

Reaching the Elevated Level of Dealing with Others Properly

The stories of the *Avos Hakedoshim* are intended to be lessons for us as we strive to emulate their great deeds in our own lives. How can one reach this level of Yaakov Avinu, where he is able to coexist and get along with others who are so difficult? What is the formula for such a level of existence?

Perhaps the 'recipe' for this elevated level of character can be found in a mishnah in Avos: רבי ישמעאל אומר הוי קל לראש ונוח לתשחורת. והוי מקבל את כל האדם בשמחה (אבות ג' י"ב) / *Rebbi Yishmael says: Be easygoing to a superior, and pleasant to the youth; and receive each person with joy*. Rebbi Yishmael discusses how one should relate to three different groups of people: Those superior to him, the youth, i.e. those in a lower position than he is, and those whose on an equal footing. Generally speaking, all those with whom one has dealings will fall under one of those three categories, and we are thus provided with guidelines on all of our different interactions with other people.

1. **One's Superiors:** This group includes anyone who has any sort of public position or the like, in which others must come on to him.

It can be one's employer, the gabbai of the shul, the principal of the school etc. How should one behave with such a person? Says the mishnah, 'Be easygoing to a superior.' Do not be the one who is always finding fault with the way things are run, or always trying to beat the system. Recognize instead, that every organization needs someone to lead it, and there will inevitably be differences of opinion. The other individual is in the position of authority, whether because he volunteered or because he was appointed, and now, that position should be respected. You may let your opinion be heard, but in a manner that is respectful to authority.

2. **One's Subordinates:** This refers to the opposite situation from the one described in the first example.

When one is in any sort of position of power or control, how will he relate to those under his sphere of control? Will he 'lord it over them', acting toward them as a superior who has no time for them? Will he completely ignore any suggestions or personal requests for help with any matter? Or, will he treat with respect those who approach him, and see if there is any way he can help them? The mishnah guides us in this position as well, telling us 'Be pleasant to the youth,' i.e. those who are below your position or rank. Behave humbly toward them, and listen to what they have to say, as well. There may be some important ideas that you can gain from them.

3. **One's Peers:** In this group are all those people with whom one does not have a giving nor a taking relationship.

He is neither the employer or the worker, neither the rav nor the talmid. These two people are simply acquaintances of each other, each trying to make his way through life as best as he can. How should such people be treated? Should they be ignored, as anyway there is no benefit to be gained from them? The mishnah tells us that this is not the case. 'Receive each person with joy.' Recognize that each individual is an important part of Klal Yisroel, who has much to offer. Understand that others are on an equal footing as you, and their needs and sensitivities deserve to be met as much as do yours. Behave with respect and concern to all, and demonstrate to each individual that he is important to you, by greeting him with a genuine display of joy.

Learning to behave in the manners described to each group of people is certainly not simple. It needs a lifetime of constant training in *middos*, and of growing to new heights in these areas. As we do begin to improve our behavior in these areas, we will notice that we are suddenly able to relate on friendly terms with people whom we had never been able to handle even being in their presence. We must hold Yaakov Avinu as our role model in getting along with all kinds of people – even those as difficult as Lavan, who was known worldwide for his deceitfulness.

Changing One's Own Self

Let us conclude this discussion with a *mashal* which will give us a perspective on the change that will be taking place within us:

There was a deer who very much enjoyed running through the forest. However, each time he attempted to do so, there was a problem: His antlers would become stuck in the trees. Finally, in frustration, the deer decided he had had enough. He found a saw and prepared to chop down all the trees in the forest. As he began chopping a few trees, the fox passed by.

"My dear deer," called the fox, "what can you possibly be doing?"

"Well," explained the deer, "I am chopping down all the trees in the forest, so that I can be free to run."

The fox realized that he must stop the deer. "Slow down! There are two problems with what you are doing. Firstly, you can spend your entire life chopping, and you will still only cut a small fraction of the forest. Furthermore, by the time you are up to the thousandth tree or so, the first ones that you cut will already have grown back! You'll never get anywhere. The second problem is, what about all

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the other animals who rely heavily on the trees for their needs? How can you selfishly cut down the trees for your own benefit when you will be harming others in the process?"

The deer saw the truth in the fox's words and began to put away the saw.

"Wait," the fox cried, "Keep the saw!"

"But why? I cannot use it as I had planned!"

"True," the fox told the deer, "you cannot cut down the trees. But there is something you can do, which is both feasible for you, and will not harm others. You can chop your own antlers!"

Similarly, when we relate to the people around us in the world, we will surely encounter people who are difficult for us. We think to ourselves, 'If only they would behave differently, things would be so much better and easier!' However, we generally cannot change those around us. Our only recourse is to change ourselves, by improving our own characters, and learning to relate to others in a pleasant manner. As the *mishnah* taught us, we must learn to become pleasant and agreeable to all people around us, each one in accordance with the position and circumstance in which we meet them. By changing ourselves this way, we will find favor in the Eyes of Hashem and people.

Dealing with Difficult People Causes One to Grow

Of course, we may wish that everyone whom we encounter would be easy to get along with, and that they would fit with our own personalities and temperaments. Such a life, however, tempting as it may sound, does not bring a person to growth. Hashem therefore arranged our lives in such a way that we will deal with difficult people, and we ourselves can become better people in the process. Yaakov told Eisav, 'I lived with Lavan for 20 years, and I had the character to deal with even a difficult person such as him – see what an elevated character is required for this level, and how I must have worked on my *middos* to reach this height!'

Bez"ח we should be *zoche* to follow in the footsteps of Yaakov Avinu and relate to every person in a beautiful manner as outlined in the *mishnah* in Avos.

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