דרכים בפרשה
נח

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וערות אביהם לא ראו

they did not see their father's nakedness.

The Torah tells us that after Noach became drunk and lay uncovered in his tent, Shem and Yefes took a garment and walked backward to cover him. The pasuk concludes, "וערות אביהם לא ראו," they did not see their father's nakedness.

The Torah already told us that they walked backward. Why does it need to tell us again that they did not see their father's disgrace?

The Baal Shem Tov teaches that when we notice a shortcoming in someone else, it can serve as a mirror, helping us recognize something we need to work on ourselves.

(There is a story told about the *schvartze volf* who puts it very sharply: "If you see someone who is ugly, and you say, 'Gevalt, how ugly you are!' know that you're talking to yourself in the mirror!")

We are all experts at noticing other people's shortcomings. We can spot someone else's mistake from across the room, while our own mistakes sit right under our noses. Apparently, the mirror works much better when we hold it up to someone else!

The Gemara in Kiddushin teaches, "כל הפוסל, במומו פוסל." The Gemara is discussing a specific situation, but the message is worth remembering: before becoming experts at identifying everyone else's faults, we should take a look at ourselves.

The Talmidei HaBaal Shem Tov develop this idea further. If Hashem brings another person's *chisronos* (shortcoming) to our attention, perhaps there is something for us to learn from it. We can use what we noticed to improve ourselves, and, when appropriate, help the other person as well. But if we walk away feeling "holier than thou", we have missed the opportunity.

There is another side to this *limud*. It is not enough to avoid looking for faults. We have to learn to notice the good.

The Gemara in Pesachim teaches, "לעולם אל יוציא אדם דבר מגונה מפיו," a person should avoid speaking in an unseemly way. The Gemara brings a proof from our parsha. Instead of simply saying בהמה טמאה, the Torah says, "ומן הבהמה אשר איננה טהורה." The Torah adds words rather than use an unpleasant expression.

If the Torah is so careful with its language, how careful must we be when our words can damage another person's dignity?

And it goes beyond what we say. Sometimes we do not repeat a negative story, but we allow it to change the way we think about someone. We may keep our mouths shut, yet still let one weakness define the entire person.

Think about how easily one negative story can change the way we see someone. A person can do years of good, help others, and show kindness. Then we hear one negative thing, and suddenly that is what comes to mind when we see him. One fault can somehow outweigh a hundred good qualities.

But it can work the other way, too. We hear something wonderful about a person, learn about an act of kindness he did, or discover a good quality we never knew he had. Suddenly, we look at him differently. We notice things we might never have paid attention to before. One good quality can change the way we see the entire person.

If one negative thing can overshadow so much good, why shouldn't one good thing help us see a person in a more positive light?

Shem and Yefes showed us another way. They did not expose their father's disgrace. They covered him. They saw a person who deserved dignity even in a moment of weakness.

This does not mean pretending that nobody has faults. It means remembering that a person's faults are not the whole person. A child can make a mistake and still have many wonderful qualities. A talmid can have weaknesses and tremendous potential. And someone can disappoint us without all the good we know about him disappearing.

The next time we notice someone else's shortcoming, perhaps we can ask ourselves two questions: What can I learn from this about myself? And what good might I be overlooking in the other person?

We cannot always control what we notice in someone else. But we can choose what we do with it. We can use what we see as an opportunity to grow, rather than a reason to feel superior. And we can choose to let the good we discover in another person shape how we see him, rather than allowing one fault to define him.

Perhaps the real test is not whether we can see another person's faults. Most of us have little trouble with that. The real test is whether we can see the good in a person even after we have noticed his faults.

Good Shabbos, מרדכי ע. אפפעל