

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Sh'lach
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darchai.noam@gmail.com
www.darchai-noam.com

How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Parashat Sh'lach – The eye and the heart

This week we read Parashat Sh'lach. The main focus of the Parasha is the sin of the Meraglim. Instead of seeing a Land flowing with milk and honey, that Hashem was providing on a silver platter, they saw a Land that devoured its inhabitants. A Land that, they believed, Bnei Yisrael would not be able to conquer. At the end of the Parasha, after dealing with the disastrous incident of the Meraglim and some other topics, we learn about the mitzva of tzitzit.

“This will be tzitzit for you. You must look at it and recall all the commandments of Hashem, to perform them, and you will not wander after your hearts and after your eyes, after which you go astray.” (Bamidbar 15:39)

The Torah tells us that by looking at the tzitzit, we should be reminded of Hashem's mitzvot and thus we will not wander after our hearts and our eyes. In some respects, the tzitzit are the antidote to the sin of the Meraglim. Rashi¹ points out the linguistic similarity between the pasukim describing the Meraglim and the pasukim describing the mitzva of tzitzit. Rashi notes that the heart and eyes are Meraglim (spies) for the body. They cause the body to sin. The eye sees, the heart desires, and the body then commits the sin.² This is comparable to the Meraglim who saw the beauty of the Holy Land, but their hearts lead them astray. They saw a distorted reality, and this led them to sin.

There is a subtle difference between Rashi's commentary and the pasuk itself. Rashi describes a sequence of events. First, the eye sees something. Then the heart covets what the eye sees. And finally, the person sins. But the pasuk has a different order. The pasuk places the heart first: “and you will not wander after your *hearts* and after your *eyes*”. Why the difference in order?

Before we try to answer this question, let's ask another question. The Torah commands us to dye one of the tzitzit strings with techeilet, a turquoise colour that is derived from a sea-creature known as the chilazon³. Why does the mitzva of tzitzit require us to include threads of techeilet? The Gemara provides us with an answer:

“It is taught in a Baraita, R' Meir would say: What is different about techeilet from all other types of colours [that it was chosen for the mitzva of tzitzit]? It is because techeilet is similar in its colour to the sea, and the sea is similar to the sky, and the sky is similar to the Throne of Glory, as it is stated: “...and there was under His feet the like of a paved work of sapphire stone, and the like of the very heaven for clearness” [(Shmot 24:10)]. And it is written: “The likeness of a throne, as the appearance of a sapphire stone” [(Ezekiel 1:26)].”

¹ In his commentary to Bamidbar 15:39.

² Midrash Tanchuma¹⁵, as quoted by Rashi in his commentary to this pasuk.

³ These days, we can no longer identify the chilazon and therefore we wear tzitzit strings that are all white. Some experts have claimed to have rediscovered the chilazon, and one can now purchase tzitzit with t'chelet strings. However, other authorities dispute this and rule that one should continue to wear only white tzitzit. It seems that we will need to wait until the Mashiach comes for this dispute to be fully settled.

The colour of techeilet should remind us of the colour of the sea. The sea should remind us of the colour of the sky. And the sky should remind us of Hashem's Throne of Glory. Why is there such a convoluted thought process? Why not just think directly of the Throne of Glory?

The Torah states "and you shall guard yourself from every evil thing".⁴ Chazal derive from this verse a warning against letting our eyes wander to forbidden sights.⁵ This prohibition is codified in the Shulchan Aruch⁶ which prohibits us from staring at that which is forbidden to us. The Torah understands human nature. If we gaze at something that is forbidden, we will come to desire it. And then we may be led to sin. That is the process that Rashi is describing. That is why we are commanded to guard our eyes.

But the pasuk in the Torah is describing something slightly different. Before we even see something, our heart may already be influencing how we are going to interpret what we see. Our biases and the desires of our heart may taint what we see with our eyes and cause us to give undue attention to certain aspects of what we see.

This is a deeper reason for the sin of the Meraglim. The Zohar⁷ explains that the Meraglim feared losing their positions of authority once Bnei Yisrael entered the Land. Since they already had a bias against entering the Land, their hearts caused them to see a distorted perspective of the Land. Their hearts led their eyes astray and they ended up giving a false report of the Land.

Our biases and desires can be very subtle and difficult to recognise. How can we ensure that our heart doesn't colour what our eyes see and that we remain objective? Consider R' Meir's explanation of the thought process linked to techeilet. The colour blue can remind us of many things. When looking at techeilet, we must not simply look superficially and let our thoughts run free. If we let our heart influence our eyes, who knows where our thoughts will end up? We may think of the sea and then think of last year's scuba diving trip to the Great Barrier Reef! Rather, we need to control and channel our thought process. We should use our intellect to control our thoughts. The blue should remind us of the sea, which should remind us of the heavens, which should remind us of Hashem's Throne of Glory. In order to minimise the risk of inappropriately interpreting what we see, we have to purify and control our thoughts first. We have to focus our thoughts and make sure that we end up at the correct destination. If we take conscious control of our thought patterns, we can ensure that our mind doesn't wander to inappropriate places.

Rashi warns us that our eyes and our hearts can be Meraglim that draw us astray. We have seen that there are two aspects to this risk. Firstly, we need to be careful of what we look at. Because: "the eye sees, the heart covets and the body sins". We can overcome this risk by guarding our eyes and being careful about what we look at. But we also learned not to wander 'after our hearts and after our eyes'. This is the risk of misinterpreting what we see. In order to avoid this risk, we need to be aware of our biases that may colour our interpretation and try to control our thoughts to ensure that we interpret what we see objectively.

Let's try something this week:

1. Be aware of what we see with our eyes. Remember we are prohibited from gazing at that which is forbidden to us and guard our eyes accordingly.
2. Try to be aware of the biases that push us to interpret what we see in a particular way. Then try to channel our thought processes and control them.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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

⁴ Devarim 23:10.

⁵ Avoda Zara 20a.

⁶ Eve HaEzer 21:1.

⁷ This idea is quoted by many commentators. See for example the Mesilat Yesharim, Chapter 11.