

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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

Vayikra – The importance of humility

This week’s Parasha starts with the word “Vayikra” – “He called”. Hashem called to Moshe and spoke to him from the Mishkan. Interestingly, the letter aleph in the word “Vayikra” is written smaller than the other letters. Why?

Rashi explains that the term “Vayikra” with an aleph connotes affection. Thus, in this case Hashem is calling to Moshe as one friend calls to another. “Vayikar” without an aleph, on the other hand, is used when Hashem calls to the wicked Bilaam.¹ It is an expression that connotes impurity and coincidence, as if to say that Hashem just happened to speak to Bilaam, but He did not enjoy meeting with him. It’s like when you see someone in the street that you don’t want to speak to, but you already made eye contact, so it’s too late to avoid him.

The Ba’al HaTurim explains why the aleph in “Vayikra” is smaller than the other letters. In Moshe’s great humility, he wanted the first word of the Parasha to be “Vayikar”, which was the same term used for Bilaam’s prophecies. Moshe did not want to draw attention to the unique relationship that he had with Hashem. But Hashem commanded Moshe to write in the letter aleph because He really did call out to Moshe with affection. As a compromise, Moshe asked Hashem if he could write the letter aleph smaller.

The Torah testifies that Moshe was the most humble person on earth.² The Torah also testifies that Moshe was the greatest prophet that ever lived, and Hashem spoke to him face to face.³ The fact that Moshe was a spiritual giant and yet still humble was arguably what made him so great. By making himself small, Moshe became great, becoming Bnei Yisrael’s greatest leader and the person through whom Hashem gave us the Torah.

The Chovot Halevavot⁴ (Section 3 - “The Gate of Serving G-d”) reminds us that Hashem is our greatest benefactor, and discusses the proper way that we should serve Him. He lists ten levels in the service of Hashem. The lowest level represents those people that are led by ignorance and their base desires to reject the Torah. (This level can barely be referred to as ‘service’.) The highest level represents those people who are certain of the truth of the Torah and recognise in their hearts what they owe the Creator for His great favour and kindness toward them. These people hasten to the service of G-d for His sake alone, with longing and wholeheartedness. It is the level of the prophets and the pious ones, who are completely devoted to Hashem.

The ninth level that the Chovot Halevavot describes, the second-highest level, is those people that are very close to the tenth level. They also believe totally in the Torah and their intent in serving Hashem is for His sake alone. The single difference between those in the ninth and tenth categories is that those in ninth category fail to adequately guard themselves against things that are detrimental to their service of Hashem. The damage creeps in, almost imperceptibly. As it says: “Dead flies can spoil and ferment the perfumer’s ointment; a little folly outweighs wisdom and honour” (Kohelet 10:1). “One mistake can destroy much good” (Kohelet 9:18).

Specifically, the Chovot Halevavot explains that this damage is caused by a lack of humility. He brings the story of a teacher chastising his disciples: “Even if you had no sins, I would still fear for you on account of something more serious than sins.” “What is more serious than sins?” they asked him. “Arrogance and

¹ Bamidbar 23:4.

² Bamidbar 12:3.

³ Devarim 33:10.

⁴ The 11th century mussar classic by Rabbeinu Bachya ben Yosef ibn Pakuda.

haughtiness” he answered. “As it says: ‘Everyone who has a haughty heart is an abomination to Hashem’” (Mishlei 16:5).

This demonstrates that a lack of humility can keep us from reaching our highest level and fulfilling our potential. Humility is the ninth level because it kicks in precisely when we have already achieved the other levels. We are on a spiritual ‘high’ and at risk of becoming arrogant because of it.

The Mesillat Yesharim⁵ also explains that humility is one of the most difficult traits to acquire. It lists a number of important middot that we need to work on. The book progresses from level to level, explaining how to achieve each stage. Humility is presented as one of the highest levels. Once again we see that it those people that have climbed so high that are most at risk of arrogance and pride. As soon as we succeed, the success can go to our head, and we are at risk of thinking that we achieved that greatness by ourselves.

Why does the Chovot Halevavot write that arrogance is considered even worse than sin? It represents a small error with great repercussions. It shows that we think we are in charge. To the extent that we feel that we are in control, we are excluding Hashem from the picture. Furthermore, it is because arrogance is so insidious. People usually know when they sin, and they can do teshuva. But arrogance is subtle and yet all-pervasive. Thus, it undermines our Divine service from the inside. It reveals a fundamental flaw in our self-concept and our relationship with Hashem. When we feel good about our growth, accomplishments, and successes, but fail to attribute them to Hashem, we are putting our egos ahead of our service of Hashem.

In the Iggeret HaRamban, the famous letter that the Ramban wrote to his oldest son, we also learn about the importance of humility.

“Once you have distanced yourself from anger, the quality of humility will enter your heart. This radiant quality is the finest of all admirable traits.”

In practice it is extremely difficult to ascend the spiritual ladder and strive to achieve greatness while simultaneously retaining anava (humility). It seems like a paradox. In his letter, the Ramban provides us with some practical advice which may assist us to perfect this vital middah:

- Speak gently at all times, with our head bowed, our eyes looking down and our heart focusing on Hashem.
- No matter who we meet, it should cause us to feel humble:
 - When we meet someone that is wiser or greater than us, we should focus on how great they are and how much we are lacking. We should give them respect. That should automatically make us feel humble.
 - When we meet someone that is less knowledgeable than us, we should focus on the fact that they are also probably more innocent than us. They have less understanding of right and wrong and the consequences of their behaviour, so their sins are more likely to be unintentional. When we sin, we have less of an excuse. We should know better!

Arrogance can manifest itself in practice in a number of ways. When we are boastful. When we fail to acknowledge or attribute our success to Hashem or to the assistance of others, thinking that it is our own brains or skills that causes us to succeed. When we think in our hearts that we are better than others. When we are immersed in our own life and our own issues, to the exclusion of others.

Working on recognising that Hashem created everything and controls every outcome can also help us to suppress our anger, pride, and haughtiness to the point where we can feel humble. If we daven to Hashem for this crucial middah, we are showing that we cannot achieve anything, including humility, without His help. By focusing on how much Hashem wants us to be humble, we will be motivated to make the effort to improve this character trait and thereby follow in the footsteps of Moshe Rabbeinu, our greatest teacher.

Let’s try something this week:

1. Focus on the importance of humility and try to be aware when feelings of haughtiness creep in. Note that it is precisely when we ascend spiritually that we are at greater risk.
2. Try to put into practice some of the Ramban’s recommendations to increase humility.

Shabbat Shalom and Purim Sameach, Rabbi Ledder

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⁵ The mussar classic by Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, a veritable guidebook to internal spiritual work.