

## DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

### “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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[darchai.noam@gmail.com](mailto:darchai.noam@gmail.com)

How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

### Bo – the first mitzvah

In this week's Parsha of Bo we read about the first mitzvah given to the Jewish nation, the mitzvah of Rosh Chodesh – the sanctification of the new moon and the Jewish calendar.

*“This month shall be for you the beginning of the months; it shall be for you the first of the months of the year”* (Shmot 12:2).

In his first comment on the Torah, Rashi, citing R' Yitzchak,<sup>1</sup> questions why Hashem did not begin the Torah with the verse quoted above. If the Torah is a guidebook of commandments then surely it is more appropriate to begin with the first mitzvah instead of the story of the creation.

R' Yitzchak concludes that the Torah began with the creation to convey the message that Hashem is the Creator of the world and thus the land belongs to Him to apportion as he wishes. When the nations of the world accuse the Jewish People of stealing the land of Israel (as they are want to do from time to time!) the Jewish people can rely on the book of Breishit as authority that the Land belongs to us.<sup>2</sup>

Actually, the Torah does cite a few other mitzvot prior to the mitzvah of Rosh Chodesh – including the mitzvah to be fruitful and multiply, the mitzvah of brit milah and the prohibition against eating the gid hanashe (sciatic nerve). However those mitzvot were not commanded to the Jewish People until Har Sinai. The very first mitzvah that Hashem commanded to the nation was this mitzvah in our Parsha.

The basic meaning of the Hebrew word mitzvah is ‘commandment’. It is also related to the Aramaic word ‘tzavta’ which means to attach or join. Since we are performing Hashem's will when we perform mitzvot we thereby create a relationship and attach ourselves to Him.

The kabbalah teaches<sup>3</sup> that Hashem created the world through his unpronounceable four-letter name: a ‘yud’, followed by a ‘heh’ and then a ‘vav’ followed by a ‘heh’. The first half of Hashem's name represents His hidden aspect in the world. The second half of Hashem's name represents His revealed aspect in the world. That is why the second half of the name is almost the same as the first half. The only difference is the yud (which is the smallest of the letters – hence representing Hashem's hidden aspect) and the vav (which looks like a yud that has been extended downwards – hence representing Hashem's revealed aspect). Hashem's four-part name is embedded within all aspects of creation. Here are some examples<sup>4</sup>:

- The text of the Torah is made up of four parts. The trop (tunes) and the vowels are ‘hidden’ since they do not appear in the text of the Torah. They therefore represent the first two letters of Hashem's name – the yud and the heh (i.e. the hidden aspect of His name). In contrast, the

<sup>1</sup> Some identify R' Yitzchak as Rashi's father.

<sup>2</sup> R' Yitzchak's proof is not directed at the nations of the world because they do not necessarily believe in the Torah's account of creation, nor do they read Rashi. Rather, it is speaking to the Jewish people, to reassure us of our right to Eretz Yisrael. If we are strong in our beliefs the nations of the world have less power over us. (See Rashi to Tehillim 111:6.)

<sup>3</sup> The following is based on the writings of the Arizal, as heard from Rabbi Yaakov Zalman Labinsky.

<sup>4</sup> The second two examples were mentioned by Rabbi Labinsky but the actual division into ‘revealed’ and ‘hidden’ is my own understanding and may not be correct.

form of the letters themselves and the crowns that appear above the letters are actually written on the scroll. In this sense they are revealed. Thus they represent the last two letters of Hashem's name which represent Hashem's revealed aspect.

- The 4 levels of creation – mineral, plant, animal and human. Animals and humans represent a more revealed aspect of life (the second half of Hashem's name). Minerals and plants represent the more hidden aspects (the first half of His name).
- The 4 seasons - spring, summer, autumn and winter. Spring and summer represent the more revealed aspect of nature. Autumn and winter represent the more hidden aspects.

How do we see Hashem's four part name in mitzvot? We can understand this connection by explaining another kabbalistic concept – the 'atbash' method. According to kabbalah, the first half of the aleph bet represents the more hidden aspect and the second half of the aleph bet represents the more revealed aspect.<sup>5</sup> The atbash method demonstrates this through swapping the first letter of the aleph bet with the last letter, swapping the second letter with the second-last letter and so on. For instance, an Aleph becomes a Taf, a Bet becomes a Shin, a Gimmel becomes a Resh etc. Used correctly, this method reveals concepts that are hidden in Hebrew words.

A comparison of the word mitzvah (mem, tzadik, vav, heh) and Hashem's 4 letter name shows that both words share the same final two letters. What about the first two letters? Remarkably, when we apply the atbash method to the first 2 letters of the word mitzvah ('mem' and 'tzadik') they convert to 'yud' and 'heh' which are exactly the same letters as the first half of Hashem's name. Thus, the first half of Hashem's name (which is the hidden aspect as discussed earlier) is literally hidden in the first half of the word mitzvah. And the second half of Hashem's name (which is the revealed aspect) is openly revealed as being the same as the second half of the word 'mitzvah'!

One lesson we can extract from this complicated analysis is that Hashem's name appears in the word 'mitzvah' – which teaches us that Hashem reveals himself in this world and interacts with us through His mitzvot.<sup>6</sup> Thus, by performing His mitzvot we are binding ourselves to His name!

This amazing manifestation of Hashem's name is also concealed in each of the individual mitzvot. For instance,<sup>7</sup> when we give tzedaka to a poor person we are literally acting out Hashem's name. The small coin represents the small letter yud, our hand represents the letter heh (we have 5 fingers and the letter heh has the gematria or numerical value of 5), our outstretched arm looks like the letter vav and the receiving hand of the poor person represents the second letter heh.

The practical message from this kabbalistic analysis is that the mitzvot are a wonderful, Divinely revealed way for attaching ourselves to Hashem. Whenever we perform a mitzvah, we are fulfilling Hashem's will. In doing so, we are developing our relationship with Him and binding ourselves to our Creator. And forming the closest possible connection to Hashem is our primary purpose and most fundamental mission in this world.

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to keep in mind that every mitzvah we perform is a fulfilment of Hashem's will! And the act of fulfilling the mitzvot is an act of revealing Hashem in this world.
2. By performing the mitzvot, we are binding or connecting ourselves to Hashem which is the purpose of our life as Jews in this world.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

<sup>5</sup> I am not an expert in kabbalah. This is simply my very basic understanding of a very deep idea. (For any kabbalists out there who are reading this, please accept my apologies if this explanation is not accurate.)

<sup>6</sup> We have learned in previous editions of Darchai Noam that a person's name reveals their essence. This of course cannot be true for Hashem Himself because it is simply not possible for humans to grasp Hashem's essence. However, Hashem's 'name' is the closest that we can get to interacting with His essence.

<sup>7</sup> Heard from R' Dovid Tsap.

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## **About Darchai Noam**

The pasuk in Mishlei (3:17) describes the Torah as follows: “Its ways are ways of pleasantness (Darchai Noam) and all its paths are peace”. The Torah is our guidebook for life. It is packed full of good advice as to how we should live our lives.

The aim of the Darchai Noam weekly email is to examine an idea from the weekly parashah relating to good middot (character traits). It will focus particularly on treating each other with respect and how to interact with each other in a more peaceful and pleasant manner. It will also suggest some practical tips for implementing these ideas in our daily lives.

By learning together each week, and making an effort to regularly put the ideas into practice, with Hashem’s help we can all gradually improve our character traits and our observance of ‘v’ahavta l’re’echa kamocho’ – loving one’s fellow as oneself.

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