

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Vaera
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Bo – constant checking and regular reminders

At the very end of this week's Parasha of Bo, we read about the mitzva of tefillin.

“And it shall be a sign upon your arms, and totafot between your eyes, for with a strong hand Hashem take us out of Egypt” (Our Parasha, Shmot 13:16)

Men are commanded to wear tefillin as a sign on our arms and head. Rashi explains that when we see the tefillin, we should be reminded of the miracles of Yetziyat Mitzrayim and we should speak about them. Ideally, we should be wearing tefillin all day. However, we are required to maintain pure thoughts the entire time while we wear our tefillin, and most people cannot manage that these days. Therefore, most people only wear tefillin during Shacharit.

There is an important halacha associated with the tefillin. The Shulchan Aruch¹ rules that the knot of the tefillin shel yad² should always be in contact with the bayit (the black box). This knot is in the shape of the letter yud and is also referred to as ‘the yud’. Some opinions hold that this requirement applies at all times, even when one is not wearing the tefillin and they are packed away in their bag. The Mishnah Berurah³ writes that the Zohar is very stringent about this requirement as there are deep Kabbalistic reasons for it.⁴ However, on a simple level, we can suggest that the yud represents the yid, the Jew. The bayit containing parchment with passages from the Torah represents the Torah. Just like the knot must always remain connected to the bayit, so too each Jew must constantly remain connected to Torah. Through the Torah, we can remain connected to the ultimate Source, Hashem Himself.

Note that it is very common for the knot to separate from the bayit, especially when the tefillin is placed on the arm and the strap is pulled tight. This means that we are forced to frequently check to make sure that the knot stays connected to the bayit. Wouldn't it be easier to just use a dab of super glue to take care of the problem once and for all? However, this is not allowed. Even though there are some authorities that suggest tying the knot to the bayit to ensure that it remains connected, this is not unanimously accepted.⁵ The very situation of the yud and the bayit require us to be ever-vigilant and to check frequently to ensure that the yud remains connected.

This idea of constant checking is represented in many ways in Judaism. For instance, wearing a kippah requires one to regularly check to make sure that the kippah is still on their head. This is especially relevant on a windy day or when one needs to run somewhere⁶. Women who cover their hair need to be constantly checking that their head covering is in place. Perhaps the message for us is that the connection between a Jew and the Source requires constant attention and scrutiny. It is not possible to simply remember Hashem once or practice a mitzva or learn Torah once and then rest. We must always and repeatedly be checking and ‘feeling around’ to see whether our connection to the Source of our existence is strong. This constant vigilance strengthens our bond

¹ Orach Chaim 27:2.

² The tefillin that go on the arm.

³ Seif katan 11.

⁴ Which are well beyond my understanding.

⁵ The Mishnah Berurah does not like this custom because if one is not careful it can cause a chatzitzah (interposition) between the tefillin and the arm. The Chazon Ish is not in favour of the custom at all, even if one were to avoid the issue of chatzitzah. There are other authorities that are more lenient.

⁶ Ironically, in the middle of writing this week's Darchai Noam, I needed to attend a number of meetings in and around Tel Aviv. It was pouring with rain and blowing a gale and I lost one on the clips of my kippah. I spent most of the day with my hand on my head holding my kippah in place... or chasing my kippah across the street.

with Hashem and His Torah. At the same time, we are given regular reminders, such as the tefillin themselves, to think about Hashem and the kindness that he does for us.

There are a number of sources where we see the importance of regular reminders and constantly checking ourselves and working on ourselves:

- In his commentary to our Parasha⁷, the Ramban explains why we continue to call the months of the Hebrew calendar by their Persian names (Nissan, Iyar, Sivan etc.). The idea is that we should be regularly reminded that Hashem brought us back to Israel from the exile to Bavel/Persia, even when we are talking about mundane things like the months of the year. By using the Persian names, we remind ourselves that we were never fully redeemed from exile and we never really returned to the glory period of the first Bet Hamikdash. That will hopefully remind us of what still needs to be done to earn the ultimate redemption.
- Sefer Tehillim in a number of places, and elsewhere throughout the Tanach, praises the one who is 'seeking Hashem'.⁸ One would think that one who had 'found Hashem' would be on an even higher level and would be deserving of more praise. Yet we don't find any such references. Seeking Hashem is the aim – we have to be constantly seeking and striving and moving forward.
- According to the Midrash, one of the reasons that we place salt on the table during the meal is that when we are sitting at the table waiting for others to wash their hands, we are without mitzvot⁹. Therefore, the salt reminds us of the eternal covenant between Hashem and Bnei Yisrael¹⁰ and serves as a reminder to 'check in' with Hashem and our Torah.

A fundamental requirement of our Avodat Hashem is to be constantly checking where we are holding and what still needs to be done. There is always room for improvement. Each time that we need to check something (like our kippah or our head covering or the position of the knot on the tefillin), we should try to remember this lesson.

The same theory can be applied to our acts of kindness and ben Adam l'chavero. People's situations are constantly changing and their needs are never static. We may have performed a significant act of kindness for another, but that does not mean that we can rest on our laurels. We should be constantly checking those around us - how they are going and what they might need. One day, someone might need urgent financial assistance. The next day they might need emotional support and a listening ear. If one is building a friendship with someone, it is not enough to just call once in a while. One must speak regularly in order work on the relationship and check up on its status. The only way to know what is the best way to help a fellow Jew is to be checking in with them frequently, just as we need to check constantly that the yud of our tefillin is attached to the bayit.

Let's try something this week:

1. Think about someone that we are helping and try to spend some time reflecting on whether we are helping them in the best way possible.
2. For those that wear tefillin, check the position of the knot on your tefillin shel yad.
3. Each time that you have to check something repeatedly, remind yourself to also check in to where you are holding in your avodat Hashem.¹¹
4. For those that wear a kippah – remember your connection to Hashem every time your hand needs to keep it in place. And invest in a few spare clips... they will come in handy one day!

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

⁷ Our Parasha, Sefer Shmot, 12:2.

⁸ See for example Tehillim 21:27, 34:11, 69:7, 69:33, 105:3-4, Divrai Hayamaim 1, 16:10, Yeshayahu 51:1.

⁹ See Tosefot to Gemara Brachot 40a (ד"ה הבא).

¹⁰ The covenant is known as a 'covenant of salt' because salt is eternal. See for example, Bamidbar 18:19.

¹¹ See footnote 6. After spending most of the day with my hand firmly on my head, or chasing my kippah across the street and fishing it out of puddles, I was feeling very grumpy. Only at the end of the day did I remember my own advice about using this as a reminder to feel connected to Hashem. Hashem was giving me an opportunity to put my advice into practice. And it only took me about 8 hours to work it out. Apparently, it's much easier to tell people what to do than to actually do it ourselves!

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About Darchai Noam

Darchai Noam is available online at www.darchai-noam.com and www.parshasheets.com. You can access this week's edition of Darchai Noam, archived back issues of Darchai Noam and other divrei Torah.

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, usually 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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