

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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

Bo – Incidental mitzvot

In this week's Parasha of Bo, we read about the first Seder night in our national history and we receive the commandment to eat matza on Pesach. The Torah teaches us that we eat matzot for a seven-day period¹:

“For a seven-day period you shall eat matzot, but on the first day [i.e., the preceding day] you shall eliminate all leaven from your houses, for whoever eats leaven from the first day until the seventh day, that soul shall be cut off from Israel” (Shmot 12:15)

Rashi² notes an apparent contradiction. In the pasuk quoted above, we are commanded to eat matzot for seven days. However, in another pasuk we are commanded to eat matzot for only six days:

For six days you shall eat matzot, and on the seventh day there shall be an assembly to Hashem, your G-d. You shall not do any work [on it] (Devarim 16:8).

Rashi explains how this contradiction can be resolved with some complex ‘Gemara logic’. Anyone who wishes to work through this logic is invited to read the footnote³. In summary, there is a strict Torah *obligation* to eat matza on the first night of Pesach⁴. On the remaining days of Pesach, we only need to stay away from chametz, but we are not actually obligated to eat matzot on those days. However, this is not stated clearly in the Torah. Why not?

The Vilna Gaon explains that though there is not an obligation to eat matza on the subsequent days of Pesach, it is still a mitzva to some extent and we get reward for doing so. However, this only works if we have the kavana (intention) that we are eating for the sake of the mitzva. We cannot overstate how powerful this idea is. By simply changing our mindset, we can change a casual snack into a holy mitzva act with immeasurable reward!

¹ Outside of Israel this applies for a period of eight days.

² Rashi's comment is based on the Midrash Mechilta and the Gemara Pesachim 120a.

³ The pasuk in our Parasha says “you shall eat matzot for a seven day period”. The pasuk in Devarim says “you shall eat matzot for a six day period”. This apparent contradiction comes to teach us about the seventh day of Pesach. On that day there is no obligation to eat matza but one must not eat chametz. From what source do we learn that on the other six days of Pesach matza is also voluntary rather than obligatory? The pasuk in Shmot refers to a “seven-day period”. There is a principle in interpreting the Torah as follows: if something was included in a broad category but was then singled out in order to teach something, it was not singled out to teach only about itself, but rather to apply this teaching to the entire category. In our case, the broad category is the seven days of Pesach. The seventh day was then removed from this general category by the contradictory pasuk in Devarim which states “for a six-day period you shall eat matzot”. This teaches us that eating matza is not obligatory on the 7th day and also on every other day in the general category (i.e., all days of Pesach). At this point of the analysis, we might think that eating matza on the first night of Pesach is also only voluntary. Therefore, we need another pasuk which specifically commands us to eat matza on the first night. Such a pasuk appears in Shmot 12:18.

⁴ That is why we are very particular to make sure that we eat the correct amount within a certain time period, as there is a Torah obligation at stake.

Based on this teaching, since we will be eating matza multiple times over the course of Pesach, we can take advantage of this opportunity to fulfil many more positive mitzvot. Before taking the first bite, we can try to have in mind that we are eating matza because Hashem commanded us to do so,

There are many other examples of mundane acts that can very easily be transformed into mitzvot by simply elevating our intention. The act of cleaning the house, cooking for others or going to work to support your family can be transferred into a holy act of chesed! The following story demonstrates this principle:⁵

When the milkman from the Bayit VeGan neighbourhood of Jerusalem passed away, Rabbi Eliya Lopian strongly encouraged his yeshiva students to attend the funeral. He explained that he had once asked the elderly milkman why he didn't retire as the work was physically gruelling. The milkman explained that he continued to work so that mothers would have milk to give to their children. He wasn't just working for his own livelihood, explained Rabbi Lopian, and it is only appropriate that such a devout servant of Hashem be honoured by attending his funeral. On another occasion, Rabbi Lopian needed medicine late one night. He found a pharmacy that was open until midnight and went there to pick up the medicine. He told the pharmacist that he was very kind to stay open so late to ensure people could get the medicine that they needed. The pharmacist replied that he was not being kind. Under the law, each pharmacy had to stay open late one night each week and tonight was his night. "I'm only here because I have to be here", he added. "What a shame", Rabbi Lopian responded. "If only you would have stayed open with the intention of helping people, you would be rewarded for eternity for the mitzva of providing this valuable service. Instead, all you have to show for your efforts is some money.

Ideally, all of our actions should be with the intention of doing mitzvot and serving Hashem. If we eat and sleep in order to have strength to do mitzvot then our eating and sleeping become mitzvot. Indeed, the Shulchan Aruch rules⁶ that all of our actions should be for the sake of Heaven. Even our mundane activities should be performed to serve Hashem or to give us something that we need to help us serve Hashem. The Shulchan Aruch teaches that before performing any action, one should carefully consider whether it will help him serve Hashem. If it will, then he should do it, and retain the mindset that he is doing it specifically in order to serve Hashem. One who lives their life this way is constantly serving Hashem.

Let's try something this week:

1. Think about all of the mundane acts that we do that can be transferred into mitzvot. Do we have the appropriate intention of trying to serve Hashem? Try to have the appropriate intention in mind before doing at least some of these acts. For instance, before eating breakfast try to say or think "I am eating to get energy to serve Hashem". (Even if we are also eating just because we are hungry or because we enjoy the food, at least part of our intention will be for a holy purpose.)
2. Make a note in your diary for the days leading up to Pesach to remind yourself to have the correct intention when eating matzot throughout the days of Pesach. (You may want to make this a regular reminder for every day of the chag, and you might also want to make it a recurring reminder that appears every year before Pesach.)

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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⁵ Adapted from "The 6 Constant Mitzvot", Artscroll p144.

⁶ Orach Chaim 231.