

DARCHAI NOAM

Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם

(Mishlei 3:17)

Chayai Sarah, October 2015

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Chayai Sarah – the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach

There is a prohibition on eating before reciting the Shema and davening Shacharit.

The prohibition on eating before the Shema in the morning is based on the Gemara in Brachot 10a. The Gemara explains that it is considered haughty behaviour to take care of one’s own physical well-being before declaring Hashem’s sovereignty, which is what we do when we recite the Shema.

The prohibition on eating before davening is based on the following pasuk:

“You shall not eat over the blood...” (Vayikra 19:26)

This pasuk is the source for many different halachot. In this case, “the blood” is interpreted to refer to one’s needs. In other words, it is forbidden to eat before asking for one’s needs (ie davening). According to most opinions this prohibition is Rabbinic, even though it is based on a verse in the Torah.

There are exceptions to this rule. For example, certain drinks are permissible and people who are sick or weak are permitted to eat. In addition, if someone is so hungry that they can’t focus on davening they are permitted to eat. Children can certainly eat, even if they are old enough to start training in mitzvah observance. You should consult your Rabbi to determine how to act.

There is also a Rabbinic decree specifically concerning time-bound positive mitzvot. One should not start a meal within half an hour of the time at which certain mitzvot should be performed. For example - shaking the lulav on Sukkot; reading the megillah on Purim; and bedikat chametz on the night before Pesach. It is also prohibited to eat before making Kiddush on Friday night and Shabbat morning, and before making havdalah.

The Rabbis were concerned that one may become distracted by eating and forget about performing the mitzvah. Hunger pangs can also serve as a powerful incentive to perform the mitzvah in question. If we know that we can’t eat until we perform a certain mitzvah, we are more likely to perform that mitzvah at the correct time. The Rabbis certainly understood human nature very well!

It is commonly noted that we should eat food for the purpose of providing us with fuel to perform mitzvot. In that way we are elevating the physical food into the spiritual dimension. That is why Birkat Hamazon is full of references to lofty ideas like the land of Israel, the Bet Hamikdash, rebuilding Jerusalem and the return of the kingship of the house of David. If all you did was just eat a sandwich, why are these ideas relevant? The relevance is that we eat in order to have energy to serve Hashem¹. However, now we can see that the opposite can also be true. If we are hungry before we perform a mitzvah we can take that physical craving and passion and instead of channelling it into food we can channel it into the spiritual dimension with a more passionate performance of the mitzva.

Men are commanded to perform time-bound positive mitzvot, which involve performing certain actions (like shaking the lulav) or reciting certain words (like Kiddush). But the ideal way to

¹ Heard from Rav Zev Leff.

perform any mitzvah is to also engage the heart. “Hashem wants the heart!”² So it seems that the old saying has an element of truth - the best way to a man’s heart is through his stomach. (This saying is not just good advice for dating and marriage!)

We can suggest that the basis for this idea of not eating before performing a mitzvah can be found in this week’s Parsha. In fact, it might have been an innovation of Avraham’s servant Eliezer. The context is as follows: Eliezer had arrived in Aram Naharaim to find a wife for his master’s son Yitzchak. He had met Rivkah at the well and she had offered to bring water for Eliezer and for all of the camels. Eliezer now enters Rivkah’s home to negotiate the marriage with her parents.

“And the man [Eliezer] came to the house and un-muzzled the camels. He gave straw and food to the camels and water to wash his feet and the feet of the men who were with him. And food was set before him but he said “I will not eat until I have said what I have to say” (Breishit 19:32-33)

The Rashbam explains that Eliezer still did not know whether Rivkah would be returning with him. He therefore resolved not to eat until the matter was finalised. Eliezer understood that he had a vital mission to perform. He was not just finding a marriage partner for Avraham’s son. He was playing a role in the birth of the Jewish people - who would have the crucial role of teaching the world about Hashem. Eliezer decided that it would be inappropriate to take care of his own personal needs until he had finalised the important mission with which he had been entrusted. First he would discharge his responsibilities, and only then he would feed his stomach.

We may learn a couple of lessons from Eliezer’s behaviour. First, we can learn the importance of self-discipline and holding back our own desires. We can also learn the importance of putting other people’s needs ahead of our own. We are naturally passionate and wilful about fulfilling our own needs. We may be less enthusiastic about fulfilling the needs of others. However if we take some of the focus off ourselves and try to focus on what other people need, we may be more able to fulfil the requirement of “V’ahavta l’reicha kamocho” (loving our neighbour as ourselves).

The following story is told about the Chofetz Chaim. One Friday afternoon a visitor arrived at the Chofetz Chaim’s home after a long journey. The Chofetz Chaim noticed that the visitor was exhausted. He encouraged him to have a nap. The visitor slept deeply for a number of hours. When he awoke, the Chofetz Chaim was sitting patiently in his chair. He told his guest that he was just in time for the evening meal and he explained that his wife had retired early because she wasn’t feeling well. The Chofetz Chaim then proceeded to share a relaxed meal with the visitor, including singing zemirot and sharing divrei Torah. When the visitor finally retired to bed he noticed the time and realised that the Chofetz Chaim had been waiting many hours to start his Shabbat meal. The Chofetz Chaim had not wanted the visitor to feel uncomfortable or embarrassed by telling him the time or starting the meal before his guest was ready. He was willing to sacrifice his own sleep to ensure that the visitor did not feel uncomfortable at having caused a significant delay.

Let’s try something this week:

1. Be aware of how much passion and effort we naturally put into making sure our own needs are met. Try to redirect some of that passion into the needs of others.
2. Consider the Rabbinical edict to daven before eating as good practice for our middot of self-discipline and self-control.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder.

² Gemara, Sanhedrin 106b.

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About Darchai Noam

The passuk 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 that usually relates 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'reiacha kamocho' – loving one's fellow as oneself.

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