

## DARCHAI NOAM

### Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם

(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?

### Noach – our inner world and our external actions

Welcome to the third year of Darchai Noam!

In this week's parsha of Noach we learn about the people's behaviour leading up to the flood. Though their behaviour was sub-standard in many ways, Hashem considered one behaviour in particular to be the final straw that broke the camel's back:

*“And Hashem said to Noach: “The end of all flesh is before me because the Earth is filled with ‘Hamas’ and I will destroy them from the Earth”. (Breishit 6:13)*

The Midrash<sup>1</sup> explains that the term ‘Hamas’ means stealing less than the worth of a perutah<sup>2</sup>. Rabbi Chanina gives an example of what might have happened – a merchant would bring a basket of beans to the market place. People would come past and steal less than a perutah worth of beans. Because each person took such a small quantity, the merchant would have no legal recourse from the courts. These small thefts would add up to a total which affected the merchant's earnings. However the merchant would have no way of recovering the damage.

The individual thefts would fall under the radar. Each individual could rationalise that stealing a couple of beans is so insignificant they are not doing anything wrong. Surely taking one or two beans is not going to affect the merchant and thus does not constitute theft. Their external actions, while not pure, gave the appearance of acceptability. However under the surface was a different picture – by taking something that didn't belong to them they demonstrated a total lack of respect for each other's property. This lack of respect ultimately led to the downfall of society and Hashem's decision to destroy the world via the flood.

What can we learn from the generation of the flood? Sometimes we also commit tiny misdemeanours and rationalise that no-one will care or notice, like borrowing someone's pen without asking. A seemingly small misdemeanour can indicate a vast underlying lack of purity of thought and purity in the heart.

Generally though, we are not guilty of ‘Hamas’ to the extent of the generation of the flood. However, like the generation of the flood, many times we also have a mismatch between our external actions and inner beliefs. This may be the case with the positive mitzvot that we do. Why are we really doing them? Sometimes we do positive acts just because it's the right thing to do. On the surface everything seems to be okay, but under the surface our heart is not really in it.

A week before Rosh Hashanah we read about the frightening tochachah (curses) in Parshat Ki Tavo. A long list of terrible curses is presented – which are understood to be connected with the destruction of the Bet Hamikdash and Bnei Yisrael going into exile. Amongst these curses is an important pasuk which explains why the curses came about:

<sup>1</sup> Breishit Rabbah 31:5.

<sup>2</sup> A perutah was the smallest denomination of currency.

*“Because you did not serve Hashem your G-d with joy and with goodness of heart...”*  
(Devarim 28:47)

This is surprising because it is well known that the first Bet Hamikdash was destroyed due to three cardinal sins (idolatry, adultery and murder) and the second Bet Hamikdash was destroyed due to baseless hatred<sup>3</sup>. Nevertheless, it seems that the root of the problem was a failure to carry out the mitzvot in a true, heartfelt way – that is, with pure intentions. Bnei Yisrael can be keeping all of the mitzvot but if they are not serving Hashem with joy and a full heart, the seeds of destruction are being planted.

In his introduction to Shaarei Kedushah, Rav Chaim Vital<sup>4</sup> explains that there are many people that keep the external practices of the Halacha but they don't really appreciate why they are doing so. Rav Vital explains that the Halacha is there to guide our behaviour and keep us on track. However the ultimate purpose is d'veikut – getting close to Hashem.

A similar concept applies with the mitzvot between us and our fellow man. We are commanded to do acts of kindness and charity. However we can do these acts of kindness for a variety of reasons. We must ask ourselves whether we really care on the inside. Do we genuinely feel for the other person because they are created in Hashem's image? Are we making an effort to really connect with each other? Or are we just going through the motions and making sure that we are seen to be 'doing the right thing'. If our heart is not in it then our performance of the mitzvot will ultimately suffer.

Consider the following scenario:

If someone knocks on our door and asks for tzedaka, we would certainly be fulfilling the minimum mitzvah if we quickly hand over a token sum and then hurry back to whatever it is that we were doing. However, if we truly gave from a pure position of trying to help the other person and please Hashem then we may spend a few extra moments speaking to the person and genuinely trying to help him.

If we try to match our inner world and our external actions, then our mitzvot will be more likely to stick over the long term. Our acts of kindness should come from the right place and be motivated by the right reasons, that is, because Hashem commanded us to do so.

As Rav Chaim Vital explains, by following the laws as set out in the Shulchan Aruch we are in the perfect position to grow spiritually, but only if our heart is in it! If we perform the mitzvot as empty rituals, then we are missing the point. And Hashem knows our innermost thoughts. So even if we fool ourselves, we cannot fool Him.

Let's try something this week:

1. When we are presented with an opportunity to do an act of kindness spend a few moments trying to engage the heart. Try to really understand the other person and try to make the act of kindness more than just an empty action.
2. Spend some time thinking about why we do each mitzvah. Is it out of habit? Because other people expect us to? To alleviate our own feelings of guilt? Or is it because Hashem commanded us to do so and we genuinely want to do what is right.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder.

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<sup>3</sup> Gemara, Yoma 9b.

<sup>4</sup> The main student of the Arizal, 1542-1620.

## **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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