

DARCHAI NOAM

Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם

(Mishlei 3:17)

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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Vaera – The 6 constant mitzvot

In this week's Parsha of Vaera we read about 8 of the 10 plagues. Before most of the plagues occurred Moshe gave Pharaoh a warning. The seventh plague was the plague of barad (hail). This plague was one of the plagues that was preceded by a warning:

“At this time tomorrow I will rain down a very heavy hail, there has never been anything like it in Mitzrayim from the day it was founded until now. And now gather in your flocks and everything that you have in the fields, all people and animals that will be found in the fields and will not have been brought into the house, the hail will fall on them and they will die.”
(Shmot 9:18-19)

We know that Hashem gave us 613 mitzvot. There are 248 positive mitzvot and 365 negative mitzvot. Each mitzvah is an opportunity for us to draw closer to Hashem. However, not all the mitzvot are able to be performed at all times. Some of the mitzvot are limited to certain times of the day or year. Some mitzvot only apply in the times of the Bet Hamikdash. Some mitzvot only apply to certain groups – eg Cohanim, Leviim, women, men or repentant sinners. It is thus not possible for one person to fulfil all of the 613 mitzvot.

However, there is a sub-group of the mitzvot known as the 6 constant mitzvot. All Jewish people are obligated to fulfil these mitzvot all the time.¹

The 6 constant mitzvot are:

1. To have faith in Hashem
2. Not to believe in other gods
3. To understand that Hashem is One
4. To love Hashem
5. To fear Hashem
6. To not stray after the thoughts of our heart and the sight of our eyes

This provides us with an opportunity to be constantly involved in serving Hashem and earning reward for the performance of mitzvot. In his introduction, the Sefer HaChinuch states that these mitzvot should not be absent from one's consciousness for even one second of our lives.

These mitzvot are performed through thought alone, not action. However, it is impossible to have 6 thoughts in our mind at the same time. Rather, each of the mitzvot represents a deep, internal awareness. Each awareness must be so ingrained that it is reflected in all of our actions. Every decision that we make should be governed by the underlying belief and internalisation of these 6 constant mitzvot without having to actively think about them. Rabbi Berkowitz compares this to our knowledge of gravity. We don't have to think about gravity. We just know about gravity intuitively and our movements demonstrate that we have absorbed the concept. Rav Berkowitz provides an analogy of driving. When we first learn to drive, we need to concentrate intensely on every step. With practice,

¹ Some of the following ideas are adapted from “The 6 Constant Mitzvos” published by Artscroll and based on a series of lectures by Rabbi Yitzchak Berkowitz.

however, driving becomes second nature. Similarly, the 6 constant mitzvot need to be studied until they become absorbed and instinctive.

So what does all of this have to do with the plague of hail?² Let's have a look at the response of the Egyptians to Moshe's warning. We will see that there are two groups of Egyptians – those who responded to the warning by taking in their livestock and those that did not. But the language used to describe both groups is not symmetrical:

“Those of Pharaoh’s servants that feared the word of Hashem brought their servants and their flocks into the houses. And those that did not pay attention to the word of Hashem left their servants and their flocks in the field.” (Shmot 9:20-21)

Whereas the first group is described as “fearing the word of Hashem”, the second group is described as “not paying attention to the word of Hashem”. We would expect the language to be symmetrical. The two groups of Egyptians should be described as those that “feared the word of Hashem” and those that “did not fear the word of Hashem”. Alternatively, the two groups of Egyptians could be described as those that “paid attention to the word of Hashem” and those that “did not pay attention to the word of Hashem”. Each word of the Torah is chosen to teach us a lesson. It is significant that the opposite of “fearing the word of Hashem” is simply not paying attention! We can learn from here that if we want to fear Hashem (ie constant mitzvah number 5) then we need to pay attention to His words.

That's a good starting point towards developing our fear of Hashem. Here are some additional ideas:

- The Rambam explains fear of Hashem in terms of awe. By studying Hashem's greatness we develop an awe of Him as we realise how insignificant we are.
- Fear of Hashem is also an understanding that we each have a unique role to play in the world. We have free choice and there are serious consequences of not fulfilling our mission.
- Rabbi Berkowitz explains that fear of Hashem is an awareness that reward and punishment are real consequences of our mitzvot and our sins. Hashem loves us so much that he won't allow us to make do with only the temporal pleasures of this world. Through reward and punishment, which help to guide us along the straight and narrow Torah path, He helps us to achieve the ultimate reward in the World to Come. When we realise this our love for Hashem becomes more meaningful and intense. To build our fear of Hashem we have to regularly take stock of our actions to make sure that we are on the correct path.

In order to learn more about the 6 constant mitzvot and the fear of Hashem in particular, we can start by learning from the sensible Egyptians. Let's pay more attention to Hashem's words to us. And try to follow them!

Let's try something this week:

1. Study the 6 constant mitzvot. They are fundamental to all other mitzvot and yet they are often neglected. See aish.com for some excellent articles, and Rav Berkowitz's lectures which are summarised in Artscroll's "The 6 Constant Mitzvos".
2. Try to learn from those Egyptian that were sensible and pay attention to what Hashem tells us to do.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

² The following idea is not my own. I read it many years ago in a weekly Parsha sheet. If anyone knows a source for this idea I would be grateful if they could let me know.

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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 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'reiacha kamocho' – loving one's fellow as oneself.

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