

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Vayera, November 2016

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Vayera – Praying for help

The Gemara¹ teaches us that the three Avot instituted our three daily prayers. Avraham instituted Shacharit, Yitzchak instituted Mincha and Yaakov instituted Ma'ariv.

The source for the Shacharit prayer appears in this week's Parsha of Vayera:

*“Avraham arose early in the morning to the place where he had **stood** before Hashem”*
(Breishit 19:27)

The Hebrew word for ‘stood’ is ‘Amad’ which is related to the word ‘Amidah’, another name for the Shemoneh Esreh. The Shemoneh Esreh is the central part of each of our tefillot. Thus we see that Avraham arose early in the morning (i.e. at the time of Shacharit) to stand before Hashem in prayer.

The context of this prayer of Avraham is that Hashem had just destroyed the evil cities of Sodom and Gemorrah. Avraham had argued passionately with Hashem to save these cities in the merit of any righteous people that may be living there. Yet, Avraham's pleas were unsuccessful and the cities were destroyed.² Nevertheless, Avraham woke up early the next morning to pray, continuing his relationship with Hashem. This teaches us a powerful lesson about both praying and our relationship with Hashem. Even if our prayers appear to go unanswered, Hashem is listening and we must continue to interact with Him. If our prayers are not answered we may feel rejected or frustrated. But if we immediately resume our relationship with Hashem this shows that we are not taking out these emotions on Him. We just realise that what we are asking for is not part of Hashem's plan at the moment.

In this world, post Adam's sin, Hashem ordained that man would have to work for a living and invest his own efforts (hishtadlut). Prayer is especially important in such a world. It serves to remind us that though we contribute our effort, Hashem governs our success and determines the outcome. Praying for help in everything that we do can have a number of benefits, including:

- We bring Hashem into the picture. This is not just a means to an end, it is important in its own right. Having a relationship with Hashem is the greatest form of true, lasting pleasure in this world.
- It reminds us that we are not in control of the world or the results of our efforts. It can be reassuring to remember that the world is run by an omnipotent, infallible being and any apparent ‘mistakes’ are really part of His master plan. This means that there is less chance that we will become despondent if our efforts do not result in success.

¹ Brachot 26b.

² Avraham's prayers were actually much more successful than it appears. In the merit of those prayers Lot was saved from Sodom and Lot's descendants included the righteous Ruth and Naamah who would be the ancestors of the Moshiach! See Darchai Noam, Parsha Vayera 2014 (5775) where this idea is discussed in depth.

- By remembering that our success really comes from Hashem there is less chance that we will have gaiva (pride) if our efforts are successful.

Not too long ago we celebrated the festival of Sukkot. Some of us (not mentioning any names) may still be in the process of dismantling our sukkah! During the festival of sukkot we are required to eat and sleep in the sukkah.³ However, we only say the bracha (laishev basukkah) when we eat in the sukkah. Why don't we say the bracha before sleeping?

This is because, unlike eating, the act of falling asleep is not in our control. We cannot make ourselves fall asleep (and indeed some people can find it very difficult to fall asleep!) If we recited the bracha and were then unable to fall asleep our bracha would be in vain. This is similar to saying a bracha over a piece of food and then not eating the food. This constitutes taking Hashem's name in vain and represents a serious transgression.

For a similar reason, we are not required to say a bracha over acts of chesed. Though we must put in the maximum effort and hishtadlut in our kind deeds, the success of our actions are outside of our control. For example, we can offer some money to a poor person but they may be insulted by the small amount and reject it. As a child I recollect offering to help my father paint the gate to our house. The tin of paint spilling on the ground and my father's pained expression were testament to the fact that such chesed, although well meaning, did not have the desired outcome. So any bracha that we would say over an act of kindness may end up being in vain.

Though we may not be able to say a bracha over our acts of chesed, we can, and should, pray for assistance. Actually, the very fact that the success of our actions are outside of our control means that prayer is particularly appropriate. Before doing any act of kindness we should say a little prayer to Hashem asking for Him to grant the desired outcome. The prayer could include the following:

- Please Hashem, help to me to be successful in this act of chesed.
- Please Hashem, help me to understand what this person needs and how I can best meet their needs in a respectful manner.
- If I am successful in helping this person, please Hashem help me to recognise that You are the source of that success and protect me from feelings of gaiva.

Let's try something this week:

1. Whether or not our prayers are answered, we must continue to interact with Hashem and accept His plan as being for the best.
2. Remember to ask Hashem for assistance before doing acts of kindness (and all acts).
3. If we are in the fortunate position of being able to give to others, there is a danger that this can cause us to feel proud and arrogant. To counter this we can pray to Hashem for help in overcoming this risk.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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³ Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 639:2. It is important to remember that if being in the sukkah causes one discomfort then they are exempt from the requirement of remaining there and they are permitted to eat and sleep outside the sukkah. In addition, some have the custom to not sleep in the sukkah at all. If in doubt, one should ask their Rabbi how to act.

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're'echa kamocho' – loving one's fellow as oneself.

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