

## DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

### “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Yitro  
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

### Yitro – Getting the message

Though the main theme of this week’s Parashat Yitro is the Revelation at Har Sinai, the end of the Parasha discusses the building of the mizbeach (altar). The final pasuk of the Parasha instructs us to use a ramp instead of stairs to reach the altar:

*“And you shall not ascend with steps upon my altar so that your nakedness shall not be exposed upon it.”* (Our Parasha, Shmot 20:23)

Rashi explains this enigmatic pasuk. Walking up steps (as opposed to a ramp) causes one to take wider steps. This is not a real ‘exposure of nakedness’, since the Kohanim were wearing linen pants. Nevertheless, taking wider steps is similar to ‘exposing nakedness’. This can be a lack of tzniyut and thus humiliating for the stones. Rashi explains that stones have no intelligence and they don’t feel humiliation. However, we can learn from here that how much more so (kal v’chomer) we should try to avoid causing humiliation to people who do have feelings.

Rashi teaches us a similar kal v’chomer lesson on the previous pasuk in our Parasha.<sup>1</sup> The pasuk states that when building the altar, one must not use an iron implement to cut the stone. Rashi explains that iron is used to make swords which are used for violence. However, the altar is used to bring peace between Bnei Yisrael and Hashem. It is not appropriate to use something which causes destruction to create a vessel intended to increase peace. The stones of the alter do not know what implement is being used to cut them, but we still must treat with appropriate instruments and avoid exposing them even indirectly to any hint of violence. Rashi explains that kal v’chomer, how much more so, if someone brings peace between others, they will be rewarded and saved from trouble.

It is important to point out that we do not know the real reason for the mitzvot. We only do mitzvot for the simple reason that Hashem commanded us to do so. However, if we are able to learn a lesson from the mitzvot that we can apply to other areas of our lives, then all the better. In the two examples brought above, we don’t currently have the privilege of putting these mitzvot into practice. However, we can still learn the lessons when we read the pasukim, and we can extrapolate these lessons and apply them to our interpersonal relationships.

The following well-known story told about Rav Yisrael Salanter, the father of the mussar movement, provides an example of putting such lessons into practice:

*A family was honoured to be hosting Rav Salanter for Shabbat. They were all very excited (and a bit nervous) about hosting such a famous Rav. In all the excitement, the wife forgot to cover the challot. The husband was very upset at this omission and started berating her in front of Rav Salanter. “How could you forget to cover the challot?!? We are hosting a very important Rav! Everything needs to be perfect!” Rav Salanter took the man aside and asked him if he knew why we have the custom to cover the challot. Rav Salanter reminded him that one of the reasons is so that we don’t embarrass the challot. We normally say the bracha over bread before the bracha over wine because bread is more important. However, when we recite kiddush we place the wine above the bread. This might be ‘embarrassing’ to the bread so we cover it during kiddush.<sup>2</sup> Yet, in berating his wife for forgetting to cover the challot, he was embarrassing his own wife! This misguided husband remembered the custom but forgot the reason behind the custom.*

<sup>1</sup> Shmot, 20:22.

<sup>2</sup> Another reason given for this minhag is that it is a reminder of the manna that was given to Bnei Yisrael in the Desert. The manna was protected by a layer of dew below and a layer of dew above. The challah board represents the layer below and the challah cover represents the layer above.

*A similar story is told of a poor and hungry Yeshiva student who was invited to a family for Shabbat dinner. The poor student was starving, but the head of the household was in no hurry to get started. He sat himself down on the couch and chatted to the poor boy for ages. When it was time for the meal, he announced that the family had a custom to skip Shalom Aleichem and Eshet Chayil just like the custom of the Chafetz Chaim. However, he didn't realise that the Chofetz Chaim would postpone these songs until after kiddush because he often had very hungry visitors who did not want to postpone the meal any longer than necessary!<sup>3</sup>*

There are many other examples of mitzvot and customs that have an underlying mussar message. For example, the Gemara<sup>4</sup> lists a number of actions that should be avoided because they can lead to loss of memory, including eating olives without adding olive oil, drinking water that remains from washing instead of getting fresh water and washing both feet at once instead of washing each foot carefully. One of the reasons given for avoiding such practices is that these actions train us to take short-cuts and become lazy.<sup>5</sup> This laziness can spill over into our middot and our learning. Instead of revising our material yet again, we may convince ourselves that we already know it well enough and take shortcuts. Thus, we are less likely to remember what we are learning. This trait of laziness can have a negative effect on our other mitzvot as well.

A question arises. Why can't we just be taught the underlying lesson and then resolve to put it into practice? For instance, instead of trying to build the mizbeach without metal implements, always covering the challot and always taking care to eat our olives with olive oil, why can't we just be told to be sensitive to other people's feelings, take care not to embarrass others, and put in extra effort with our learning? The following true story demonstrates that this leap is not so simple.

*Our mild-mannered hero, let's call him AL to protect his identity, was the proud owner of a new dishwasher. He carefully read the instructions before the first use. One of the tips in the instruction manual was to always place sharp knives pointing down so that one would not cut themselves when removing them after the cycle. "That's a sensible idea", thought AL to himself. The first time that he loaded the dishwasher he was in a rush and he quickly added the cutlery to the special cutlery receptacle. Some of the sharp knives were pointing up. AL was in too much of a rush to turn the knives around. "It's OK, I'll just remember to be careful when I unload the dishwasher", he thought. You can probably guess the rest of the story. AL forgot to be careful and he ended up with a deep cut in his finger!*

In real life situations, we are often distracted and busy and we do not always remember to implement these important lessons in practice. However, through regular and repetitive actions and symbolic reminders (such as covering the challot or adding olive oil to our olives), we are slowly but surely drilling these important messages into our very hearts and behaviour.

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to adopt the lessons that Rashi teaches us in this week's Parsha. Remember to try to act in a way that will not humiliate others, and be sensitive to their feelings.
2. Remember that many of the mitzvot provide us with practical lessons that can help to shape our middot too.
3. The lessons behind some of the mitzvot and customs are obvious. However, others require us to put in a bit of thought or do some research. It is worth making the effort to do so in order to benefit from the underlying wisdom.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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<sup>3</sup> Heard from Rav Moshe Donnebaum.

<sup>4</sup> Horayot 13b.

<sup>5</sup> Taken from "Meaning in Mitzvot" by Rabbi Asher Meir. The case of the olives requires some explanation. Olives are really designed to make olive oil, which requires some hard work. If one eats olives in their natural state, they are taking a short cut and acting lazy. If one adds olive oil, they are demonstrating that they are eating the olives whole because they want to, but not out of laziness. (This message is obviously less relevant these days when we buy olive oil from the store and we don't squeeze the olives ourselves.) In reality though, we don't know the real reasons for the Gemara's advice. There might be a spiritual reason beyond our understanding why these actions cause forgetfulness.

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The pasuk 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, usually 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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