

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?

Terumah – choose the appropriate middah

In this week's Parasha, Hashem instructs Moshe to ask Bnei Yisrael to donate certain materials for the Mishkan. No-one was obligated to donate. Each person was free to give as much or as little as their heart desired.

The Nasiim (princes) of the tribes had a wonderful opportunity. As leaders, they could be the first to fulfil this mitzva of donating towards the Mishkan. However, they allowed the rest of the people to donate first, offering instead to cover any shortfall. Was this the right decision?

The Nasiim are criticised for their decision. In Parashat Vayakhel (which we will read in 3 weeks), we learn that the Nasiim donated the precious stones for the Kohen Gadol's uniform (Sh'mot 35:27). The word Nasiim is written without the letter yud. Rashi explains that this is a punishment for their behaviour. They were planning to donate the shortfall for the Mishkan but the rest of the community donated everything that was needed. All that was left to donate were the precious stones. Because they were 'lazy' (Rashi's description), their name was spelt without the letter yud.

It is difficult for us to objectively judge the Nasiim. For us to make such an offer in response to a request for tzedaka would be wonderful. But evidently, at their exalted level, the Nasiim did have a shortcoming. They should have exhibited more zerizut (alacrity) to do the mitzva of donating to the mishkan.

Hashem wasn't relying on the people to donate their possessions so that the Mishkan could be built. Hashem doesn't need our donations. Rather, Hashem was giving Bnei Yisrael the precious opportunity to be involved in the building of the Mishkan. That's why the request to Bnei Yisrael was phrased as follows: "*Speak to Bnei Yisrael and have them **take** for me an offering...*" (Sh'mot 35:2). We would have expected the request to be phrased as "give" not "take". Donating to the Mishkan was an opportunity that was available for Bnei Yisrael to **take**.

The Mesillat Yesharim¹ provides us with a list of character traits that we should seek to acquire in our service of Hashem. The character traits are provided in a particular order based on a Baraita in the name of R' Pinchas ben-Yair. Alacrity is the second character trait in the list. The Messilat Yesharim guides us as to how to move up the list of character traits – from watchfulness, to alacrity, cleanliness of sin, abstention of improper practices, purity, piety, humility, fear of sin and holiness.

The Hebrew word for character trait is Middot. This has the same grammatical root as two other Hebrew words: Madim (uniform) and Midah (measure)². This is not just a coincidence. If a Hebrew word is grammatically related to another Hebrew word it means that there is an intrinsic connection between those two words. There must be something that we can learn from the words 'uniform' and 'measure' that we can apply to the idea of character traits. Let's look at each of these in turn.

Uniforms: We wear uniforms at certain times and when attending particular places. When it is no longer appropriate, we take our uniforms off. For instance, a child that goes to school will wear a uniform while they are at school. A worker will wear his or her uniform or appropriate work attire while they are at work. There is a different uniform for playing sport. We also have a uniform (special

¹ By Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato (the Ramchal) (1707-1746)

² This idea was heard from Rabbi Akiva Tatz.

clothing that is set aside) for Shabbat and Yom Tov. We choose the uniform that is appropriate and we change our clothing as needed.

Character traits should be the same as a uniform. Just like we have a wardrobe full of clothing, we also have a number of character traits to choose from. It is up to us to decide which character trait is appropriate at any given time. Sometimes it is appropriate to act with alacrity (eg when running to perform a mitzva). At other times it is appropriate to be more cautious (eg when it is not immediately clear how to respond in a given situation).

Measure: It is also up to us to decide what measure of each character trait is appropriate at each time. For example, sometimes it is appropriate to be very generous. At other times it is appropriate to be less generous.

Ideally, we should work on ourselves to the point that we are in a position to decide what Middah to use in each situation. We should decide this with our heads, not with our hearts. Yet often, we let our emotions decide for us.

All character traits are appropriate in different times and places. The traits of pride and anger should generally be avoided, but even they are appropriate in small measure in some circumstances. Chovot Halevavot³ lists a number of character traits and instructs us as to the occasions on which they are appropriate to be used⁴. For example, pride is appropriate when meeting those who deny G-d, so that we clearly indicate our opposition to their views. Anger is appropriate when falsehood prevails over truth. Mercy is appropriate for the needy and the poor. Ruthlessness is appropriate when taking vengeance against the wicked.⁵

Refining our middot is the work of a lifetime. Let's focus on alacrity because that is the middah that we brought out from this week's Parasha. Alacrity is appropriate when doing a mitzva. As the children learn in kindergarten – "when a mitzva comes your way, you do it straight away". By exhibiting alacrity, we demonstrate our attitude towards the mitzva, and ultimately to Hashem and the Torah.

Keep in mind the concepts of 'uniform' and 'measure' as discussed above. Try to be aware of whether we are choosing how and when to use this particular middah appropriately, or whether we are letting our emotions make that choice for us. Consider the following scenario as an example:

Chaim finally comes home after a long hard day at the office. He feels exhausted. He collapses into his favourite chair and starts to read the paper. His wife comes and asks him for some help but he says "maybe later". Then his child asks him for help with homework but he says "see if Mummy can help you". Then the phone rings – it's an important client with an urgent request. He jumps out of his chair and races to the phone. He then spends the rest of the evening working furiously in his study to give the client what is needed.

Chaim's actions, and the speed with which he performs them, reveal a lot about his priorities and what he values in life.

Let's try something this week:

1. Be aware of when we naturally exhibit the character trait of alacrity.
2. Be aware that the mitzvot where we struggle to show alacrity are exactly the areas that we need to work on the most. This is our point of growth.
3. Try to plan in advance when it will be appropriate to exhibit this character trait and when it will be inappropriate (given our individual challenges, strengths and the areas that we are working on).

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

³ By R' Bachya ben Yoseph ibn Paquda

⁴ Gate 3, Chapter 10

⁵ Chovot Halevavot lists a number of middot and explains when each trait is appropriate. If you have access to this book it is worth reading this section (see page 341 of the Feldheim edition).

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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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