

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Terumah
February 2021 / Adar 5781

darchai.noam@gmail.com
www.darchai-noam.com

How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Terumah – Feeling whole

In this week's Parasha of Terumah we learn about the plans for the building of the Mishkan - the portable sanctuary that accompanied Bnei Yisrael during their travels throughout the desert. The Parasha contains many intricate details about measurements and materials that were used in the construction. Though an architect might get a lot of pleasure from studying this Parasha, the rest of us may find it difficult to understand its relevance. In truth, however, there are countless lessons that can be learnt.

The Torah cites many measurements for the Mishkan and its vessels and most of them are whole numbers. For example, the altar was 5 amot x 5 amot and 3 amot high. However, the Aron (the Holy Ark which housed the 2 tablets of the Ten Commandments) was made up of numbers that were not whole. It measured 2.5 amot x 1.5 amot and 1.5 amot high.

The Shlah Hakadosh¹ explains that the Aron contained the tablets that Moshe brought down from Har Sinai, a reminder of the covenant of Torah between Hashem and Bnei Yisrael. The Aron is analogous to the Torah scholar who carries the Torah within him. The 'broken numbers' of the Aron's measurement remind us that the Torah scholar must remain humble and avoid becoming arrogant. Interestingly, the first set of luchot which were fashioned by Hashem Himself were also broken and they were considered holier than the second, unbroken set.

The Gemara (Chullin 89a) teaches us that it is specifically the trait of humility that Hashem favours in Bnei Yisrael.

Hashem said to [Bnei Yisrael], my children, I desire you because even when I grant you greatness you diminish yourselves before Me. I gave greatness to Avraham and he said: 'I am dust and ashes' (Breishit 18:27). I gave greatness to Moshe and Aharon and they said: 'What are we?' (Shmot 16:7). I gave greatness to David and he said 'I am a worm and not a man' (Tehillim 22:7).

The Mesillat Yesharim – a guide book to internal spiritual work – lists a number of important middot that we need to work on. The book progresses from level to level, explaining how to achieve each stage. Humility is presented as one of the highest levels. Perhaps this is because it is precisely those people that have climbed so high that are most at risk of arrogance and pride.

The Mesillat Yesharim² also provides a practical example of how to achieve humility. An intelligent person needs to acknowledge that their intelligence is just part of their G-d given nature. It is a gift bestowed by Hashem that can be taken away at any time. Therefore, conceit and haughtiness are irrational. One who is wise has an obligation to use their wisdom to help others. As with any other blessing that Hashem has bestowed on us, being arrogant is simply foolishness, and represents a failure to recognise Hashem's hand and control.

¹ Rabbi Isaiah Halevi Horowitz, 1565 –1630.

² The mussar classic by Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto.

The story is told of a courier that is delivering a cargo of precious jewels. He proudly shows off his 'wealth' to his family and friends. Obviously, the courier is acting foolishly, because he and everyone else knows that the precious jewels do not belong to him. He has merely been entrusted with them and instructed to deliver them to their destination. Similarly, we have been "entrusted" by Hashem with our positive attributes and instructed to use them for our life's purpose. (On the other hand, the Gemara³ teaches us that "Everything is in the hands of Heaven except for fear of Heaven" - the only thing that is in our control is our Yirat Shamayim, our fear of Heaven. Working to increase our Yirat Shamayim, is something that truly belongs to us and is something that we can feel proud of.)

To achieve humility, the Mesillat Yesharim also recommends being averse to positions of authority, always showing respect to other people and fleeing from honour.

The story is told of a man who went to his Rabbi with a question. "We learn in the Gemara⁴ that 'one who pursues honour, honour will flee from him; one who flees from honour, honour will pursue him'. Well I've been fleeing from honour for years but I'm not receiving any honour. Why not?" The Rabbi replied: "That's because while you are fleeing from honour you are busy looking over your shoulder to check whether honour is following you!"

Genuine humility can be difficult to achieve. Some people take pride in how humble they think they are. It's like the old joke about a man sitting in shul and trying to work on his humility. He would beat his chest and repeat to himself over and over again: "I'm a nothing. I'm a nothing". Another man noticed what he was doing and thought it was a good idea. He sat down next to the first man and began to join in. The first man looked at the second man with disdain and said "Look who thinks he's a nothing!"

Finally, the Mesillat Yesharim teaches us that the best way to achieve humility is to take a cold, hard look at ourselves and our flaws. Honest reflection will reveal that we have a lot to be humble about!

(Note that when it comes to looking at others, we need to take the opposite approach and overlook other people's flaws and give them the benefit of the doubt. Our egos encourage us to be gentle and understanding when it comes to ourselves and yet be critical of others. The truly humble person will be able to switch this around as required.)

Let's try something this week:

1. Reflect on what we feel proud of ourselves for. Then practice one or more of the Mesillat Yesharim's tips to conquer our arrogance and increase our humility.
2. Remember that the only thing that we can truly claim credit for is our Yirat Shamayim.
3. Recognise our strengths as simply gifts that Hashem has bestowed upon us to be used properly and they could be taken away at any time.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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³ Brachot 33b.

⁴ Eruvin 13b.