

DARCHAI NOAM**Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם**

(Mishlei 3:17)

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Pekudai – the delicate balance of physicality and spirituality

This week's Parsha of Pekudai describes the completion of the building of the Mishkan and its accessories. This week we also complete Sefer Sh'mot, the second book of the Chumash. In his introduction to Sefer Sh'mot, the Ramban sets out the theme of this Sefer: Galut and Geula; Exile and Redemption.

The Ramban explains that the physical exodus from Egypt does not complete the redemption process. Yetziat Mitzrayim represented merely a physical redemption. The redemption would only be complete with a spiritual redemption – when Bnei Yisrael returned to the spiritual level of their forefathers with Hashem's presence dwelling amongst them. Bnei Yisrael had received a tradition from Yaakov and Yosef that the true redeemer would offer them a double redemption¹ - physical and spiritual. The spiritual redemption required the revelation at Har Sinai and the receipt of the Torah. However, this singular event would not be repeated and its effect would wear off over time. A complete redemption required the setting up of the Mishkan, which functioned as a portable reminder of the revelation at Har Sinai, giving Bnei Yisrael the opportunity for a constant relationship with Hashem.

This is one reason why the book of Sh'mot ends off with the creation of the Mishkan. It is only at this point that Bnei Yisrael's redemption process is complete – with both physical and spiritual aspects. This redemption was meant to last forever. We had the opportunity to have a permanent physical and spiritual redemption. Due to our sins it did not last forever. We are still in galut.

A number of decades ago, the Russian refuseniks were not allowed to practice their Judaism and were not permitted to leave Russia. Whenever the Russian ballet or orchestra would tour the world, Jews would demonstrate outside the performance with a powerful message for the Russian government. Like Moshe, we demanded: "Let my people go". But that is only half the message that Moshe presented to Pharaoh. If we look closely at the pasukim, we will see that Moshe actually said "Let my people go... so that they may serve Me". People usually only quote the first half of this verse and leave out the second half. Yes, freedom alone may sound attractive. But it is only truly worthy if we channel that freedom for the good. And the best 'good' is serving Hashem and learning and keeping his Torah. In effect, we are meant to replace slavery to Pharaoh with serving Hashem.

Today, we are still in exile because the Moshiach has not yet come and the Bet Hamikdash has not yet been rebuilt. Though it is a relatively comfortable exile for many of us, it is still an exile. There is a risk of being lulled into a false sense of security by the fact that we are not physically enslaved. However, we need to bear in mind that a full redemption involves both physical and spiritual redemption. Many of us spend far too much focus on attaining physical comfort and not enough effort on spiritual attainments. It is true that Hashem placed us in a physical world. We need to eat and sleep and earn a parnassa and buy a house. These are all physical acts. But Hashem wants us to develop our spiritual side even while we are involved in the physical world.

¹ See Rashi to Sh'mot 3:18.

This is the constant challenge that we all face throughout our lives. How can we live in a physical world and deal with physical desires and realities but at the same time be above that world. It's a constant battle against going too far to either extreme.

When I first learned to drive, I often drove too close to the kerb. My driving instructor, Malcolm, pointed this out. I over-corrected and then drove too close to the middle of the road. I then over-corrected the other way and drove too close to the kerb again. Malcolm taught me a powerful lesson: to stay in the middle of the lane one needs to **constantly adjust**. Little adjustments guarantee that we do not veer too far to one side or the other. After 25 years of driving this adjustment process has now become instinctive. But I am still constantly adjusting as I drive. We are all constantly adjusting to make sure that we stay in the middle of the lane.

This adjustment process also applies to the delicate balance between physicality and spirituality. We need to constantly adjust to find the right balance. Focusing too much on physicality can suck us into the never ending cycle of consumerism and materialism. But this is not for our good. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks explains - consumerism is the most efficient method created by man to mass produce and distribute dissatisfaction and unhappiness.

The risk of going too far the other way can also be dangerous. There is a phrase that appears in the Gemara – “Tefasta meruba lo tefasta, tefasta ketuna tefasta”. Loosely translated, this means that if you try to grab too much you will end up with nothing. If you try to take a more modest amount you will at least end up with something. Rabbi Itamar Schwartz² teaches that forging ahead too fast in Torah observance without a firm foundation is like building a castle in the sky. It can all come tumbling down. In his excellent book “Rediscovering the Lost Self: A guide to healthy, stable and sensible teshuvah”, Rabbi Dan Tiomkin teaches the importance of being authentic to ourselves as we travel the teshuvah path. In the vast majority of cases, the slow and steady approach ensures lasting success.

Chazal teach us that it is important to serve Hashem with simcha.³ This is the happy medium. We are not supposed to slave away to a cruel master. And we are not supposed to while away our freedom by essentially serving ourselves and our own desires. Rather, we serve a Master who loves us. Let's use this week as an opportunity to fine tune the balance between our spirituality and our physicality. Let's focus on our physical side but only in order to enhance our spiritual core so that we can serve our Master with love.

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to notice where we are placed in the delicate balance between physical considerations and spiritual considerations in the daily decisions that we make.
2. Before we make a decision, try to focus more on the spiritual factors rather than the physical factors. For example, instead of asking “which option will give me more pleasure/money/fun”, we can ask “which option will allow me to serve Hashem better?”

Chazak Chazak Venitchazek!

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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² Author of the Bilvavi series.

³ See Tehillim 100:2.

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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