

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Vayakhel/Pekudai, March 2017

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Vayakhel/Pekudai – external vs internal

In this week's double Parsha of Vayakhel/Pekudai we read about the building and inauguration of the Mishkan and its accessories. After much work, the portable sanctuary that would accompany Bnei Yisrael for 40 years in the desert was finally completed.

Rav Gideon Binyamin¹ points out that the Mishkan seems to have been designed inside out. From the outside, the Mishkan looked like a typical tent. It had a nicely embroidered covering but it did not stand out as anything special. When one entered into the courtyard, one would see a large copper alter. As one travelled deeper into the interior, the quality of the accessories increased. The interior of the sanctuary was divided into two rooms. The first room, known as the Kodesh (the Holy) contained three beautiful golden items – the menorah, the table and another alter. The innermost room was known as the Kodesh Hakodashim (the Holy of Holies). It contained the most precious item of all – the Holy Ark with the beautiful golden cherubim which housed the original luchot (tablets on which the Ten Commandments were written) that Hashem gave to Moshe at Har Sinai.

The outside of the Mishkan was available for everyone to see. In contrast, only select people were allowed inside. The deeper you travelled, the more restricted was the admission. Only Kohanim were allowed into the Kodesh. Only the Kohen Gadol was allowed into the Kodesh Hakodashim and only on Yom Kippur.

It seems a waste to store the most precious items inside where they could not be enjoyed and appreciated by everyone. Rav Binyamin explains that the lesson for us is to understand that the superficial aspects of life are less important. Our 'p'nimi', or what is on our inside, is much more important. It's common to put more emphasis on external appearances because that is what we first see. It requires effort to go beneath the surface in order to understand and connect to the true worth of something or someone.

This idea is supported by a fascinating insight of the Vilna Gaon. In regards to the laws of kashrut the Torah lists four animals that only contain one of the two necessary kosher signs and are thus deemed not kosher. The first three animals (the camel, the hyrax and the hare) only contain the 'inner sign' of chewing their cud. This sign is more internal to the animal and less obvious to the observer. These three animals lack the outward, more obvious, sign of split hooves. The pig, the fourth animal on the list, contains the outward, obvious sign of split hooves but lacks the more internalised sign of chewing its cud. The pig thus represents hypocrisy. It lies on the ground with its 'kosher' looking feet spread out in front, as if to say "look, I am kosher". However, deep inside, the pig is clearly not kosher.

The Midrash² compares these four animals to the four kingdoms under which Bnei Yisrael were exiled. The pig is compared to Edom/Rome under whom we are suffering until today.

¹ The Rav of Nof Ayalon.

² Midrash Tanchuma, Shemini 8.

Edom/Rome has now been replaced by modern, Western, secularism, but the exile is the same. Just like the pig, this 'kingdom' is hypocritical. From the outside it appears 'kosher' – exhibiting such features as freedom and civil rights. However, on the inside, it is antithetical to Judaism.

The Vilna Gaon also explains the four exiles in terms of these four non-kosher animals. However he explains the symbolism differently.³ He explains that the animals represent the Jewish people during these exiles. In the first three exiles, the Jewish people were strong on the inside (i.e. their faith in Hashem) but lacking in their external features (i.e. mitzvah observance). The fourth and current exile is represented by the pig. The Jewish people are strong on the outside, with strong communities, shules and learning institutions, but weak on the inside. Our faith and the intention behind our mitzvah observance are lacking. Though many people perform many mitzvot, they are done purely from a dry, ritualistic approach. The heart is lacking. Based on this approach, the fourth exile constitutes a time when superficiality dominates over depth and inner truth. This supports the idea that we learnt above, the importance of focusing on the inner dimension and not just superficialities.

However, another story in the Gemara seems to teach the exact opposite lesson.⁴ When Rabban Gamliel was the Nasi (the head of the Sanhedrin), he had a policy that only students whose inside (i.e. thoughts and feelings) matched their outsides (i.e. conduct) were allowed into the study hall. When Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya briefly replaced Rabban Gamliel as Nasi, he changed the policy and allowed anyone who wanted to study to do so. As a result of the change in policy there was a tremendous growth in the number of students and many outstanding halachic questions were able to be resolved. Rabban Gamliel became disheartened, fearing that his policy had prevented Bnei Yisrael from learning Torah. That night, Rabban Gamliel had a dream whose imagery suggested that the new students were worthless and that his policy had been correct. However, the Gemara teaches that this dream was only shown to Rabban Gamliel in order to ease his mind. In reality, the Gemara confirms that Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya's new policy was the better approach.

The above story suggests that what is on the outside is sufficient and it is not so important if such superficial actions are matched with inner kavana (intention)! How can we reconcile these two approaches?

Perhaps we can reconcile the two approaches as follows. When we look at ourselves, we need to focus on our inside. We should try to learn the lesson of the Mishkan and the Vilna Gaon and make sure that our thoughts and feelings and kavana match our external conduct and appearance. However, when it comes to other people, we should adopt the policy of Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya. Instead of concerning ourselves with others' intentions, we should simply accept their actions at face value. In this way we give other people the benefit of the doubt and we also give them a chance to improve and to develop their inside!

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to focus on our own internal world – our thoughts and feelings and the kavana behind our performance of the mitzvot, as opposed to simply fulfilling the requisite external actions.
2. When it comes to other people, we should only focus on and accept their externality and give them the benefit of the doubt. Even if we know that their internal motivations are not pure, we can give them a chance to improve by overlooking any seeming hypocrisy.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

³ Heard from Rabbi Yaakov Labinsky.

⁴ Gemara, Brachot 27b-28a.

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About Darchai Noam

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 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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