

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Vayikra, April 2017

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Vayikra – the correct approach to sins

Parshat Vayikra deals with the various types of korbanot that were brought in the Mishkan and later in the Bet Hamikdash. Some of these korbanot were brought as atonement for sins. Perek daled (Ch 4) of sefer Vayikra lists four examples of sins that may be committed and the corresponding korban required in each case. Specifically:

“If the anointed Kohen [i.e. the Kohen Gadol] will sin...” (Vayikra 4:3)

“If the entire assembly of Israel errs...” (Vayikra 4:13)

“When a leader [of Israel] sins...” (Vayikra 4:22)

“If an individual person sins unintentionally...” (Vayikra 4:27)

Whereas the other three examples begin with the word “if”, the Torah introduces the case of a leader sinning by using the word “when”. This suggests that it is a foregone conclusion that a leader **will** sin.

Rashi explains that the Hebrew word for ‘when’ (‘asher’) is similar to the Hebrew word for ‘fortunate’ (‘ashrei’). Thus the pasuk is hinting to the fact that the people are fortunate when their leaders are humble enough to admit that they had sinned and bring a korban for atonement.

However we can ask a question on Rashi. Why is a nation fortunate if their leader sins but is humble enough to admit their mistakes? Surely the nation would be even more fortunate if they had a leader that never sinned at all! However, Rashi understands that this is not realistic. Leaders are human, not angels, and therefore by definition they will make mistakes. Indeed the Gemara states that in the history of the world there were only 4 individuals that did not sin¹. Since it is practically impossible to expect a perfect leader, the best that we can hope for is a leader that is humble enough to admit their mistakes and atone for them. In fact, a person that sins and is able to overcome their evil inclination and do genuine teshuva is in some respects even greater than a person who never sinned!²

Most people would say that the original sin of Adam and Chava is that they ate from the tree of knowledge of good and evil³. However, interestingly, Adam and Chava were not punished immediately after eating from the forbidden tree. Hashem knew exactly what had happened but he first asked Adam “Have you eaten from the tree which I commanded you not to eat?” Hashem was giving Adam and Chava a chance to admit their guilt and to do teshuva⁴. However, instead of admitting their guilt, Adam blamed Chava (what a chutzpah!) and Chava blamed the snake. Only after they failed to admit their sin to Hashem were they punished and banished from Gan Eden. This suggests that the real sin, for which they were punished, was a failure to admit that they had sinned!

The Midrash⁵ describes a discussion that took place between Cain and Adam after Cain had killed his brother Hevel. Adam enquired about his judgement and Cain replied that he had done teshuva and

¹ Gemara, Shabbat 55b. The four individuals were Yishai (David HaMelech’s father), Kilav (David’s second son), Amram (Moshe’s father) and Binyamin (the only brother, apart from Reuven, not involved in the sale of Yosef).

² Rambam’s Mishneh Torah, Teshuvah 7:4.

³ The following idea was heard from Rabbi Ari Kahn.

⁴ See Breishit 3:9-11.

⁵ Breishit Rabbah 22:13.

his punishment was softened. Adam was shocked. "Such is the power of teshuva," he exclaimed, "and I didn't know!"

Hashem does not expect us to be sin-free. As proof, we can simply look at the Shulchan Aruch. A huge percentage of halachot in the Shulchan Aruch teach us what to do when we make a mistake! For example:

- Kashrut - what happens if I use a milk spoon to stir my chicken soup? How do I kosher a utensil that was used with non-kosher ingredients?
- Shabbat – what if I accidentally cook food on Shabbat? How can I move a muktze item if it was left in an inconvenient place (like in the middle of the table)?
- What do I do if I find chametz in my house on Pesach?

This suggests that making mistakes is expected. We are not angels. Hashem created us as humans so that we can work hard to overcome our deficiencies and improve ourselves. As Rabbi Pliskin states in his book on "Courage" - one of the greatest teachers is trial and error, which naturally involves error. Mistakes should not be something to be ashamed of. Rather, we must admit our error and do our best to do complete teshuva, including correcting any damage that was done. It is really our egos that make admitting our sins and doing teshuva so difficult. If we did not have such well-developed egos we would manage to wipe the slate clean much more regularly and easily.

Reuven was a successful professional⁶. One day while working for a client he made a costly mistake. His first thought was "How can I cover this up? Who can I blame?" But he knew deep down that his best course of action would be to admit his mistake and try to rectify it. He took a deep breath and reached for the phone. As he suspected, the client was not happy. Reuven apologised, he told the client that he would cancel his bill and he offered to do whatever he could to fix the damage. Reuven managed to salvage the relationship. The client appreciated Reuven's honesty and became one of his most loyal clients.

There are many, many examples of great Rabbis who change their minds and admit they were wrong:

- There are a number of inconsistencies between the Rambam's commentary on the Mishnah (which the Rambam wrote as a young man) and his Mishneh Torah (which he wrote later in his life). The commentators often explain that the Rambam changed his mind later in life.
- Shemirat Shabbat K'hilchata - the extremely popular and authoritative book of laws relating to Shabbat, by Rav Neuwirth, was re-published with a number of changes.
- In Gemara Brachot, we see that the Amora Rav in his later years retracted one of his earlier rulings about the halachot of Brachot.⁷

If these great Torah leaders were not afraid to admit that they changed their mind, we can also learn that making mistakes is part of life. Remember - Hashem created teshuva before He created the world.⁸

Let's try something this week:

1. Accept and admit our mistakes. Be gentle on ourselves and others when they make a mistake. Remember that mistakes are a natural sign of being human.
2. When we make a mistake, have the courage and humility to admit it and try to do teshuva and correct the damage. In this way, we are actually correcting the original sin of Adam and Chava and growing into a better person than we were before.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

⁶ The principle of this story applies in many situations e.g. lawyers, accountants, teachers, children, friends...

⁷ Page 42b, see footnote 14 in the Artscroll Gemara. The Blake Street shule Gemara shiur discussed this point.

⁸ Pesachim 54a.

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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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