

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Vayikra
March 2018 / Nissan 5778

darchai.noam@gmail.com
www.divreitorah.net/darchai-noam

How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Vayikra – focusing on prayer

In this week's Parsha of Vayikra, the Torah starts focusing on the laws of the korbanot that were offered in the Mishkan and later in the Bet Hamikdash. It can be difficult for us to relate to korbanot because they have not been part of our Divine service for almost 2,000 years. Since the destruction of the second Bet Hamikdash and until the Bet Hamikdash is rebuilt in the times of Moshiach, our prayers replace korbanot. Instead of offering up animal sacrifices, we offer Hashem our tefillot. As the prophet Hosea teaches us:

“And let us pay for bulls [of sacrifice] with our lips” (Hosea 14:3).

The Gemara¹ explains that the daily prayer services were instituted by the Sages to replace the daily korbanot.² Shacharit and Mincha replace the two daily Tamid offerings and Maariv replaces the burning up of the leftover parts of the animals that were performed at night.

By learning about tefillah, we are able to indirectly tap into the concept of korbanot. Let's start by looking at how the Kuzari³ describes tefillah:

“He does not recite his prayers by rote... each word is accompanied by the proper thought and intent...this segment of time [which he devotes to prayer] is the most excellent and choicest of times... He anticipates the moment's arrival... The cream of his day and night are the three times of prayer...this order of prayer nurtures his soul as food nourishes the body... the longer his soul goes without prayer, the more it is darkened by the influence of world affairs...”

Most of us do not manage to experience this level of kavana in our prayer experience on a regular basis. However, iyun tefilla (concentrating on our prayers) is one of the precepts for which we are rewarded in this world and in the world to come⁴. How can we tap into this deeper experience of tefillah?

In many shuls, the following words are written above the Ark: “Da Lifnei Mi Atah Omed” (“Know before Whom you are standing”). If we truly realise and internalise before Whom we are standing when we pray, it will be much easier to have the right frame of mind.

When we finish davening our Amidah, we take three steps backwards, as if one is taking leave of a king (which is exactly what we are doing). After completing the three steps, one should remain standing in place until the Chazzan reaches the kedushah, or at least until the Chazzan begins reciting his repetition. At the very least, one should stay in place for a few moments before taking three steps forward. The Gemara⁵ compares one who walks away immediately without pausing to a dog that returns to its vomit!

How can we understand this strange and graphic analogy? Perhaps we can understand it as follows. One who has the privilege to stand in a private audience before the King of kings would ideally like to remain there indefinitely. It should be very difficult to step away. But we have no choice. We cannot stay there forever. The way of the world is that we eventually need to return to our everyday lives. However, rushing to return to our everyday lives demonstrates that we are eager to end the audience and return to our everyday lives. We are in effect revealing that it wasn't so difficult for us to step away. Similarly, no-one likes to vomit. It's a painful and uncomfortable experience. But sometimes we have no choice. The way of the world is that sometimes we have to go through this uncomfortable experience in order to clear out something that is bad for us and allow us to continue functioning. But if a dog returns to eat its own vomit, it shows a mistaken belief that the disgusting vomit

¹ Brachot 26b.

² The other opinion that is brought by the Gemara is that the 3 daily prayer services were instituted by each of the three Avot. The two opinions are not necessarily inconsistent. It could be that the Avot introduced the idea of daily prayer and the Sages later tied those prayer services to the daily korbanot.

³ Section 3.5.7. The Kuzari is a classic book of Jewish philosophy written by Rabbi Yehuda Halevi in 1140.

⁴ Gemara (Shabbat 127a). This is one of the passages that is recited after the Brachot on the Torah, see page 16 of the standard Artscroll Ashkenaz siddur.

⁵ Yoma 53b.

is delicious and appealing! Similarly, a person who rushes away from his audience with the King is taking something that is disgusting but necessary and turning it into something positive and appealing!

A person who rushes away from their Amidah is showing that they find the material world to be more enjoyable and appealing than being in the palace of the King. In order for us to feel a genuine reluctance to step away from the palace and back to our mundane concerns, we need to feel a genuine love for Hashem and being in His presence.

However, practically speaking, how can we turn around a habit of many years of rushing through davening without concentrating on the words? How can one inculcate the idea of "Knowing before Whom we stand"?

Rav Moshe Weinberger suggests a wonderful idea. Each week, after Shabbat, he suggests that we choose one passage from davening to be our focus for that coming week. We should spend some time reading up about that passage, reading the commentaries, perhaps checking out the source of the words in the Tanach and understanding their meaning. For the rest of that week, we should then spend a little more time than usual focusing on that passage during our davening. The following week we should choose a different passage to focus on. In this way, we can ensure that at least one part of our tefillah has an appropriate amount of kavana.

However, as with any new positive initiative, the going may be challenging, particularly at the beginning. The Yetzer Hara may test us to see just how much we want to grow. For example, someone I know decided to try this idea and they chose a section in the Amidah to focus on. Each time that they started the Amidah, they reminded themselves that their special passage was coming up and they tried very hard not to forget to have extra kavana. But it seemed that the harder they tried, the less concentration they had. Inevitably, before they realised what was happening, they found themselves stepping out of the Amidah and they had totally forgotten to focus on their special passage!⁶ A solution to this problem is to include a bookmark or a paperclip in your siddur as a reminder. It can also help to use a sticky yellow note or to write some notes in pencil in the margin of the siddur with some key ideas to focus on.

If one adopts this approach, something remarkable might happen. Imagine going to visit a new friend, and on the way you bump into an old friend. You are delighted to meet them and you stay a little longer than expected to catch up with your old friend. Similarly, you might be planning to give special attention to a paragraph in the Shema this week. But then you reach the passage in Pesukai D'zimrah which was your focus for last week. You can't help but linger over that passage as well, for old-time's sake! And after a while, your davening will be littered with these places which have special meaning for you and encourage you to pause and increase your kavana!

Which passage will you choose to focus on this week? Here are some suggestions:

- The pasuk of "Poteach et Yadecha" in Ashrei – perhaps you could focus on how Hashem provides all living things with their needs.⁷
- The first 15 verses of Hodu at the beginning of Pesukai D'zimrah for a high-level overview of Jewish history.
- The first bracha before Shema in the morning – you could focus on how great are Hashem's works and think about the fact that Hashem renews the world daily.
- Modim Anachnu Lach – you can add in a list of things that you are personally grateful for. The appropriate place to add in your personal list is before the words "V'kol Hachaim"
- The first paragraph of Aleinu which reminds us of the important role that Jewish people have to play in world history, which can help us to feel gratitude for being Jewish.
- Fill in your own section here... which part of the davening talks to you this week?

Let's try something this week:

1. Choose a portion of the davening to focus on each week and do some preparation. Start this week!
2. When taking three steps back after the Amidah, focus on Who you are stepping away from and try to foster a reluctance to leave His presence.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

*** **

⁶ If you think this is based on my personal experience... you are absolutely right!

⁷ Itay Boker, a student at Yeshivat Sha'albim, provided a novel interpretation to this pasuk. He suggested that we are thanking Hashem for giving us each a "ratzon" i.e. a desire to make the effort to accomplish what we need. In other words, even our ratzon, our desire, is a gift from Hashem.

About Darchai Noam

Darchai Noam is available online at www.divreitorah.net/darchai-noam. You can access this week's edition of Darchai Noam, archived back issues of Darchai Noam and other divrei Torah.

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, usually 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.

If you know someone who might enjoy receiving this email please feel free to pass it on to them or email me their details so I can add them to the subscription list.

You are welcome to use the content of this email in any way that will help to spread the learning of Torah. However please attribute credit appropriately.

Many of the ideas that I use in Darchai Noam are based on ideas that I read or heard from various sources. Where possible I try to quote the source. However, in some cases I cannot recall the source. For that I apologise. If I do discuss an idea that I heard from somewhere else, any errors are purely my own.

Darchai Noam is available online at www.divreitorah.net/darchai-noam. You can access this week's edition of Darchai Noam, archived back issues of Darchai Noam and other divrei Torah.

How to subscribe or unsubscribe

If you would like to subscribe or unsubscribe to Darchai Noam, please send an email to darchai.noam@gmail.com with the word 'subscribe' or 'unsubscribe' in the subject.