

DARCHAI NOAM

Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם

(Mishlei 3:17)

Acharei Mot, April 2014

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Acharei Mot – the Yom Kippur service

This Shabbat is Shabbat Hagadol. There are two major Shabbatot in the year when communal Rabbis give extra long sermons - the Shabbat before Pesach (Shabbat Hagadol) and the Shabbat between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur (Shabbat Shuva). On Shabbat Hagadol, the Rabbi usually speaks about ideas relevant to Pesach and on Shabbat Shuvah the Rabbi usually speaks about ideas relevant to teshuvah (repentance).

I once heard a Rabbi joke that he would prefer to do it the other way around. On Shabbat Shuvah everyone is presumably thinking about teshuvah anyway. So it is an opportune time to remind everyone about Yetziat Mitzrayim, which is one of the foundations of our emunah. Conversely, on Shabbat Hagadol everyone is already thinking about Pesach and Yetziat Mitzrayim anyway. So it is an opportune time to remind everyone about the importance of doing teshuva.

Fortuitously, this week's Parsha of Acharei Mot teaches us about the Yom Kippur service. This fulfills the above-mentioned Rabbi's preference by essentially discussing Yom Kippur on Shabbat Hagadol.

Forgiving each other

Historically, Yom Kippur is the day that Moshe came down from Har Sinai after spending three separate periods of 40 days on the top of the mountain. This time, Moshe brought with him the second set of tablets, to replace the set that was broken after the sin of the golden calf. This was a sign that Hashem had finally forgiven Bnai Yisrael for the terrible sin. Since then, Yom Kippur has become the special day when we obtain forgiveness for our sins.

In this week's Parsha, we read about the service that the Kohen Gadol was required to perform to allow him to enter into the holy of holies as part of the Yom Kippur service. This day was the only time that anyone was permitted to enter the holiest part of the Mishkan / Bet Hamikdash¹. The holiest person in the world, on the holiest day of the year, entered into the holiest place in the world, in order that our sins could be forgiven.

But Yom Kippur does not automatically atone for all of our sins. Hashem, in His mercy, is quick to forgive us for the sins that we commit against Him if we do genuine teshuvah. However, He does not forgive us for sins that we commit against other people, unless we first obtain forgiveness from them.

Tefillah Zakkah is a very moving prayer that appears in the Yom Kippur machzor before the Kol Nidrei service². The prayer lists our body parts and explains what we should use those body parts for (eg doing mitzvot, serving Hashem, being kind to others). The prayer then remorsefully states that we used all the parts of our bodies to do the opposite of what they were intended for. The prayer then begs for Hashem's mercy and pledges to do better in the future.

The final paragraph of this prayer contains a declaration of forgiveness to other people who may have harmed us. We ask Hashem not to punish them on our account. We then ask Hashem to grant us

¹ There are opinions that Aharon was unique in that he was the only Kohen Gadol who could enter the kodosh hakedoshim whenever he liked, provided that he performed the service as described in this week's Parsha.

² Tefillah Zakkah was written by Rabbi Avraham Danzig. The information presented here about this prayer is based on the commentary in the Artscroll Yom Kippur machzor, pages 38-49.

favour in other people's eyes so that they also forgive us. This is a critically important paragraph and is a perfect way for us to enter into Yom Kippur.

Due to its length, many people do not complete the whole of Tefillah Zakkah before Kol Nidrei starts. The Chafetz Chaim thus urged that this final paragraph be recited earlier in the prayer. The Artscroll machzor follows the Chafetz Chaim's advice. Many Rabbis also remind their congregants at the beginning of the Yom Kippur service of the importance of forgiving each other.

But why should we wait until Yom Kippur to forgive each other? We can do this every day. The first paragraph of the bedtime Shema ('Ribono shel olam...')³, which we should recite very night before going to sleep, contains a similar declaration of forgiveness. The story is told of a certain Rabbi⁴ who met a person who had committed a very hurtful sin against him the previous day. The Rabbi treated this person in a very respectful and courteous manner. The Rabbi's student was amazed that the Rabbi did not seem to be affected at all by the incident that had occurred only one day earlier. When he questioned the Rabbi about this, the Rabbi explained that he had already forgiven the perpetrator with a full heart when he said the bedtime Shema. By saying the declaration of forgiveness with complete kavana (devotion) it was as if the incident had never occurred.

Rabbi Twerski's book on forgiveness⁵ explains that forgiveness is beneficial to the person who does the forgiving. Rabbi Twerski provides tips on how to forgive effectively – something that is notoriously difficult to do.

Kol Nidrei

The Torah attaches extreme gravity to our words. As Shlomo HaMelech says: 'death and life are in the power of the tongue' (Mishlei 18:21). We see this in the laws relating to the making of a vow (a neder). When making a neder, the spoken word has the force of Torah law.

The Chachamim were strongly opposed to the making of nedarim. Therefore there is a custom to say 'bli neder' ('without a vow') before undertaking certain obligations. People who have made nedarim are encouraged to have them annulled (hatarat nedarim). The Chachamim regard it as an extremely serious matter to approach the days of judgement with a violation of a neder. Therefore we do hatarat nedarim twice during this time - Erev Rosh Hashana and the Kol Nidrei service on Erev Yom Kippur.

The fact that Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur both begin with a form of hatarat nedarim reinforces the seriousness of vows and, more generally, reminds us to be particularly vigilant with the words that we speak. Putting in the effort to choose our words carefully is a common theme in Darchai Noam , but it is well worth repeating.

Let's try something this week:

1. When reciting the bedtime Shema, pay extra attention to the first paragraph ('Ribono shel olam') and have in mind to completely forgive those who have sinned against you.
2. If you do not generally recite this prayer, just focus on forgiving others each night before bed. And try to say the bedtime Shema, even just once.
3. Remember the importance of our words and put effort into choosing them carefully.

There will be no Darchai Noam next week (Chol Hamoed Pesach). Darchai Noam will return for Parshat Kedoshim.

I wish you all a meaningful, kosher and joyous Yom Tov. May we all internalise the messages of Pesach and grow in our emunah.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

³ See page 288 of the standard Ashkenaz Artscroll siddur.

⁴ I do not recall which Rabbi is the subject of this story.

⁵ 'Forgiveness - Don't Let Resentment Keep You Captive' by Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski

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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 parsha 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'reiacha kamocho' – loving one's fellow as oneself.

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