

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Acharai Mot Kedoshim
May 2020 / Iyar 5780

darchai.noam@gmail.com
www.darchai-noam.com

How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Acharai Mot Kedoshim – the mystical heights of the humble shoe

This week we read two Parshiot – Acharei Mot and Kedoshim. Acharei Mot details the Yom Kippur service that the Kohen Gadol would perform in the Bet Hamikdash. Nowadays, we don't have the benefit of that service. However, one of the laws of Yom Kippur that does still apply is the prohibition against wearing leather shoes. There are many instances throughout the Torah and halacha where shoes are significant. For example, mourners must remove their shoes; Moshe was told to remove his shoes at the burning bush; Kohanim performed their service in the Bet Hamikdash whilst barefoot and other visitors to the Bet Hamikdash also needed to remove their shoes; and Kohanim today remove their shoes to give the priestly blessing. We also remove a shoe as part of the chalitzah ceremony (which is explained below) and it is forbidden to wear leather shoes on Tisha B'Av. What lessons can we learn from the humble shoe?

To understand the symbolism of the shoe, we need to take a closer look at the chalitzah ceremony¹. This ceremony is performed when a husband dies childless. If the deceased man has a brother, that brother is supposed to marry the widow (his sister-in-law) and this marriage is known as “yibum”. There are very deep mystical reasons behind this law related to reincarnation of souls. These days we do not perform yibum. Instead, the chalitzah ceremony is performed (which includes removing the brother's shoe). This ceremony frees the widow from marrying her brother-in-law and permits her to marry someone else.

How can we understand this chalitzah ceremony and the removal of the shoe? When a man dies childless, he does not have any descendants who can carry on his role in the world. We want to give him a second chance to establish descendants.² However, a neshama on its own is purely spiritual and cannot be active in the physical world. We therefore need to give him a body which will allow him to move about in this world. When the brother-in-law marries the widow and they produce a child – that provides the body that the neshama needs.³ The neshama consists of a number of levels (nefesh, ruach, neshama, chaya and yechida). The highest level is up in the heavens. The lowest level of the neshama rests in the body.

The closest analogy for the relationship between the body and the soul is the relationship between the shoes and the foot. Just like the neshama needs a body to move around in the world, so too the foot needs a shoe to move around freely. Just like the lowest part of the neshama rests in the body, similarly, the lowest part of the body rests in the shoe. That is why we remove the shoe of the brother-in-law during the chalitzah ceremony – by not marrying the widow he is denying a body for the neshama that is waiting in Heaven. Therefore, we take away his shoe because this is a physical representation of what is taking place in the spiritual worlds.

This explanation helps us to understand why a mourner is required to remove their shoes. Removing the shoes serves as a reminder that the neshama of the deceased relative still exists, it has just been removed from the body. Similarly, when we remove our shoes, our feet still exist! After the mourner gets up from shiva they put their shoes on again. Perhaps this can serve as a reminder that the deceased relative will one day return to their body,

¹ See Devarim 25:5-10 which describes this ceremony.

² This explanation of chalitzah is discussed by a number of commentators and in kabbalistic sources. I first heard it explained by Rabbi Akiva Tatz.

³ It is not clear to me whether the soul of the deceased man himself is being reincarnated or whether it is the neshama of his unborn son who is waiting for the body. According to my (very limited) understanding, the Ramban understands the former while the Maharal explains according to the latter. Either way, the deceased man is being given a second chance to re-establish a line of descendants. Perhaps we can suggest that the brother of the deceased man is best placed to perform this role because his DNA is a close match. This means that the body of the resulting child will be most similar to the body that would have been created had the deceased man remained alive and had a child.

at the time of Mashiach when we will have techiat hameitim (resuscitation of the dead). This can be a source of comfort to the mourner. This idea is also relevant to the halacha of removing our shoes on Tisha B'Av.

Why did Moshe have to remove his shoes at the burning bush? We can understand this using the same analogy. Moshe was in the presence of Hashem. When one is experiencing such intense spirituality, the connection with the physical world becomes less important. In this case, one's physical body is just an interference. When one is confronted with such an intense spiritual experience, the appropriate response is to remove one's shoes – to distance ourselves from the physical world. This idea also explains why Kohanim would remove their shoes when serving in the Bet Hamikdash, why other visitors to the Bet Hamikdash would also remove their shoes, and why we are forbidden to wear leather shoes on Yom Kippur.

According to halacha, it is only leather shoes that are classified as shoes.⁴ That is why we are allowed to wear non-leather shoes on Yom Kippur and Tisha B'Av. Why is this the case? Remember our analogy from above – the physical relationship between the foot and the shoe is analogous to the spiritual relationship between the soul and the body. Just as a foot rests in a shoe, the soul rests in a body. The shoe represents the body. Leather itself used to be a part of an animal's body. Therefore, if the shoe itself is made from a body (i.e. the leather of an animal), then the shoe is a much stronger representation of this relationship.⁵

There is an interesting alternative explanation for the connection between removing shoes and kedusha. Rabbi Shraga Pollack⁶ suggests that when a person wears shoes, he can walk freely without worrying about what he is stepping on. However, when a person is barefoot, he needs to pay careful attention to where he steps or he risks injuring his feet. Rabbi David Silverberg⁷ explains that this is the essence of kedusha. When we aspire to be more holy, we are choosing to separate ourselves from the mundane. In order to achieve this more successfully we must take more care about what we do and where we go. We need to exercise discretion and think carefully before making decisions. This would explain why it is appropriate to remove one's shoes in a place of holiness.

It is interesting to note that we remove our shoes during intensely spiritual times and also during times of intense mourning and sadness.⁸ We see that the same physical act can have different meanings depending on our underlying intention. Thus, it is not just the act that is important, our underlying thoughts and kavana are also critical. And the humble shoe can be a powerful symbol in these varying situations.

Let's try something this week:

1. When we stride into shul with our shoes on,⁹ remember that the shul is a Mikdash Me'at – a small reminder of the Bet Hamikdash. In the Bet Hamikdash the spiritual experience would be so much greater and we would not be allowed to wear our shoes. This should prompt us to offer a brief prayer to Hashem to return the Bet Hamikdash to us.
2. When we take our shoes off at night, contemplate the analogy between the shoe and the foot to the body and the soul. Hopefully this will help us to remember our life in this world is only temporary. One day our neshama will separate from our body, just like our foot separates from our shoe. This should encourage us to focus on matters of spirituality, rather than matters relating to the temporary, physical world.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

* To subscribe to Darchai Noam, please email darchai.noam@gmail.com with the word 'Subscribe' in the subject.

⁴ Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah 382:1 (which deals with the laws of Aveilut).

⁵ I heard this idea from Rabbi Mordechai Becher.

⁶ A Rabbi in Hungary. This idea is found in his 1929 work "Tishbi".

⁷ Yeshivat Har Etzion.

⁸ This same phenomenon occurs in other areas as well. For example, there are other halachot that are common between Tisha B'Av and Yom Kippur (such as fasting, abstaining from washing and abstaining from marital relations). It is also interesting to note that many of the halachot that apply on Chol HaMoed also apply to one who is in mourning.

⁹ Hopefully Hashem will allow us to enter our shuls again very soon when the Corona virus passes!