

## DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

### “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Acharei Mot, May 2016

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

### Acharei Mot – Saying farewell to Pesach

We just celebrated the festival of Pesach. Let's take one last look and see what lesson we can take with us.

On Pesach, chametz is absolutely forbidden. Consuming chametz on Pesach is more serious than consuming non-kosher food during the year. We have a multiple stage strategy to ensure that we don't even come close to consuming or possessing any chametz on Pesach.

- We clean the house for weeks
- We sell any chametz that remains in our possession
- We do a final search by candlelight the night before Pesach
- We burn any remaining chametz that we find
- We twice declare any chametz that we missed nullified
- Many of us have numerous customs such as avoiding kitniyot, non-gebrokts and avoiding various foods that are sometimes (or used to be in the past) processed with chametz

However, interestingly chametz is perfectly permissible for us to consume during the year. In fact, on Shabbat and Yom Tov it is a mitzvah to eat chametz (challot) as part of our seudot. How can we understand such a dichotomy? Is chametz acceptable or not?

It is well known that chametz represents pride and arrogance. The Sefer HaChinuch<sup>1</sup> explains that when flour and water mix with yeast and become chametz they raise up and inflate. Chazal teach that euphemistically this process of becoming bigger than one really is and occupying more space that we need represents arrogance. Hashem particularly dislikes arrogance: “Every arrogant heart is an abomination to Hashem”<sup>2</sup>.

The Rambam<sup>3</sup> explains that we each possess many character traits. In almost all cases, we should avoid either extreme and rather aim for the midpoint of each character trait. For example, we shouldn't be too miserly but we also shouldn't be too much of a spendthrift; we shouldn't be too cowardly and we shouldn't be too rash. The Rambam explains that there are two exceptions – pride and anger<sup>4</sup>. We should tend towards the extreme of humility and we should avoid anger as much as possible. However, even these character traits have their place. We sometimes need to show anger, for example when disciplining children or righteous indignation at a chilul Hashem. A good example is the story of Pinchas<sup>5</sup>, who showed anger on behalf of Hashem. We also need a hint of pride in order to stand up for what is right and exert an influence. We need a bit of pride in the form of self-confidence to do kiruv, to spread Torah and to carry out our tafkid in this world. We also need Jewish pride to perform the mitzvot and carry out Hashem's will in the

<sup>1</sup> The Sefer HaChinuch was likely written by Rabbi Aharon HaLevi of Barcelona in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century. It provides explanations and reasons for each of the 613 mitzvot. The discussion of chametz appears in Mitzvah 117.

<sup>2</sup> Mishlei 16:5.

<sup>3</sup> Hilchot De'ot, Chapter 1.

<sup>4</sup> Hilchot De'ot Chapter 2, Halacha 3.

<sup>5</sup> See the end of Parshat Balak.

face of the nations (and, unfortunately, secular Jews) that often mock us. According to one view in the Gemara, Rabbis need a little bit of pride in order to exercise their authority<sup>6</sup>.

The Rambam was a great physician and he provides us with advice to keep healthy from both a physical and a spiritual perspective. How should we act if we find that we have strayed from the Rambam's middle path? The Rambam advises that one who has swayed in the direction of one of the extremes in a character trait should practice being in the opposite extreme until they can return to the proper path. For example, if someone finds themselves being too stingy, they should try to be extra generous for a time until they can comfortably return to the middle path.

Pride is a middah that is almost impossible to avoid. Hashem wants us to impact the world and have a positive impact over our own sphere of influence. By necessity we feel a measure of pride as we are successful in carrying out our tafkid, our role in life. Yet, we see that Hashem abhors arrogance and as the Rambam teaches we should be careful not to become over-confident. Perhaps this why Hashem makes sure that we each have one week a year, Pesach, to follow the Rambam's advice and move to the opposite extreme. We distance ourselves completely from chametz (which represents pride). As we are ridding ourselves of physical chametz, we should be ridding ourselves of spiritual chametz as well. This week of Pesach can serve to balance our ego and pride, ideally leaving us with an appropriate and healthy level of pride for the remainder of the year.

Another factor that can tip us over the edge from healthy, appropriate pride and self-confidence to unhealthy arrogance and over-confidence is when we fail to bring Hashem into the picture. If we attribute to Hashem everything that we have, everything that we own, and all of our strength, then we are more likely to have a healthy level of pride.

Some people race to the local bakery as soon as possible after Pesach to buy a fresh bagel. Let's rather stop for a moment and try to internalise the message of Pesach. Do we need chametz, pride, so desperately? Let's try to assess where we are holding and try to face the year ahead with an appropriate level of pride.

Let's try something this week:

1. Let's reflect on our middah of confidence and pride in all areas of our life. Do we have a healthy dose of confidence or are we egotistical? Have we brought Hashem into the picture and acknowledged that we would be nothing without Him?
2. Remember, without Hashem we are nothing, With Him we can do and be anything. It's up to us whether we invite Him in.
3. Let's strive for a healthy balance between confidence and humility. If we find we are too much one way we can follow the Rambam's advice and overcompensate temporarily in order to bring us back to the middle path.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

Note: as the majority of our readers are located outside of Eretz Yisrael we will be following the calendar of Parshiyot for Chutz L'Aretz.

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<sup>6</sup> Sotah 5a.

## **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 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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