

DARCHAI NOAM

Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם

(Mishlei 3:17)

Acharei Mot-Kedoshim, May 2015

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Acharei Mot-Kedoshim – Being Hashem’s partner in holiness

This week, those outside Israel read a double Parsha – Acharei Mot and Kedoshim.¹ There is a thematic link between these two Parshiot with an important lesson for us about our role in the world.

First we need to explore some background concepts. The mystics² teach that everything that Hashem created exists on three planes – space, time and soul. Hashem created space and the ‘stuff’ that exists in space, He created the concept of time and then He created the purpose of creation – the soul or the human being.

Hashem hides Himself behind the world. That is why the Hebrew word for ‘world’ (Olam) has the same root as the Hebrew word for hidden (Neelam)³. If Hashem were to be obviously present in the world then the concept of free will would not exist. If it was blatantly obvious that Hashem was right here with us then no-one would sin. However Hashem wants us to have free will in order for us to earn our reward and to feel the associated sense of achievement. It would be unfair to reward someone for a good deed or punish them for a misdeed if they have no choice in the matter. Hashem wants us to **choose** to do the right thing and thus earn our reward in the World to Come. In order to enable us to do this, Hashem hides himself.

On the other hand, if Hashem were to hide Himself too well, and there was no chance of finding Him, then we would have the opposite problem. The physical world exerts a powerful influence on us because we experience it strongly with all of our senses. If we had no chance at all of discovering Hashem then we would have no chance of discovering the truth and living a Torah life. We would be drawn too strongly towards the physical. Hashem does not expect us to do the impossible.

So Hashem acts in a finely balanced manner – He hides Himself so that we can have free will. And he also reveals just enough of Himself so that we have a chance of discovering Him.⁴ When Hashem reveals himself, we experience holiness. And when He hides himself we experience the absence of holiness. We see this phenomenon in each of the planes of creation.

- **Space.** There are certain spaces that are more holy, like the Bet Hamikdash, the Kotel, shules, the Bet Midrash. In contrast, there are other spaces that appear to lack any semblance of holiness.
- **Time.** There are certain days that are more holy, like Yom Kippur, Shabbat, the other Yamim Tovim, times spent in shule davening, time spent learning in a shiur. There are other times that seem to have no holiness at all, such as first thing Monday morning!
- **Soul.** There are certain people that seem to exude holiness, such as the Avot, the Prophets, the great Tzaddikim, the Kohen Gadol, the Gedolei Hador (the great Torah leaders of every generation). These are the people that we should look up to as someone to emulate.

¹ Those in Israel read Parshat Emor.

² See for example Sefer Yetzirah.

³ Heard from Rabbi Akiva Tatz.

⁴ This idea was presented by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks in his Covenant and Conversation series.

The first Parsha that we read this week, Acharei Mot, describes the Yom Kippur service conducted by the Kohen Gadol in the Mishkan / Bet Hamikdash. The Yom Kippur service brought together the peak of holiness in each of the three planes of creation. The holiest person (the Kohen Gadol); on the holiest day (Yom Kippur); in the holiest place (the Kadosh Hakadoshim – the Holy of Holies).

However, not every day is Yom Kippur; not everyone is the Kohen Gadol; and not everywhere is the Holy of Holies. As we explained above, Hashem doesn't reveal too much of Himself in creation. He leaves a lot of spaces that are apparently devoid of holiness so that we can have free will. What is the appropriate response to this phenomenon? The answer lies in Parshat Kedoshim - the second Parsha that we read this week.

Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying: 'Speak to the entire congregation of the children of Israel and say to them "You shall be holy because I, Hashem your G-d am holy"' (Vayikra 19:1)

Hashem wants us to be his partner in bringing holiness into the world. By acting in a holy way we can elevate the mundane parts of the world and thus fill in the spaces that Hashem has left for us. We can strive to do this in each of the three spheres of creation.

- **Space.** We can try to bring holiness into spaces that are not usually holy. For example, we could designate a special place at home where we learn Torah; we could use our car for listening to mp3 shiurim.
- **Time.** We can try to inject some holiness into mundane times. For example, while waiting in a queue try to revise some Torah; before going into a business meeting offer a short prayer to Hashem asking for success; at the dinner table share some Torah thoughts or talk about good middot with our family.
- **Soul.** We can't all be the Kohen Gadol or a great Tzaddik. But we can all look for someone that is worth looking up to and try to emulate their character traits. A good way to accomplish this is to choose a small (but difficult) area of our character that needs improvement and try to work on it every day.

Let's finish off by having another look at the Yom Kippur service by the Kohen Gadol. The Kohen Gadol had the amazing opportunity of entering the Holy of Holies – the holiest place on earth. Yet what did the Kohen Gadol do during this special time? Instead of just basking in Hashem's presence and enjoying the spiritual bliss, the Kohen Gadol would offer a special prayer for his fellow Jews⁵ – a year of wealth, abundant crops, affordable prices, sufficient rain, sweet fruits, good commerce, healthy children, a year in which Bnei Yisrael will not need to be dependent on each other or upon other people. Thus, at the height of holiness, the holiest person, on the holiest day, in the holiest place and the Kohen Gadol's thoughts were directed at the wellbeing of his fellow. There is a powerful lesson in that for us. We too can be holy simply by thinking about each other's wellbeing. We can partner with Hashem to bring holiness into the world by remembering that all people are creations of Hashem, and by striving to treat each other the way that Hashem wants us to.

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to be Hashem's partner in bringing holiness into the world and elevating the spaces that Hashem has left for us to fill. Look for opportunities to increase holiness in the 3 spheres of creation – space (eg listen to shiurim in the car), time (eg use time waiting in queues to learn Torah) and soul (eg choose one aspect of our character and try to work on it each day).
2. Remember the lesson from the Kohen Gadol's prayer on Yom Kippur. If we want to be holy, we too should be concerned about the wellbeing of each other.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

⁵ The prayer is brought in the Chazzan's repetition of the Mussaf Shemoneh Esreh on Yom Kippur. It is based on the texts found in the Gemara Bavli, Yoma 53b and the Gemara Yerushalmi Yoma 5:1.

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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 parashah that usually relates 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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