

DARCHAI NOAM

Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם

(Mishlei 3:17)

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Emor – The Chagim

This week, those outside Israel read Parshat Emor.¹ The second half of the Parsha, starting with the fourth Aliya (chapter 23 in the book of Vayikra) includes details about each of the festivals in the Jewish calendar. Starting with Pesach, the Parsha then explores Shavuot, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Sukkot.

The introductory words to this section appear somewhat strange. The first 4 pasukim of chapter 23 read as follows:

- 1 *Hashem spoke to Moshe saying:*
- 2 *Speak to the children of Israel and say to them: Hashem's appointed festivals that you shall designate as holy occasions. These are my appointed festivals:*
- 3 *For 6 days work may be done and the seventh day is Shabbat Shabbaton (a day of complete rest), a holy occasion, you shall not do any work, it is a Shabbat for Hashem in all of your dwelling places.*
- 4 *These are Hashem's appointed festivals which you shall designate in their appropriate time.*

The Parsha then continues by discussing the festival of Pesach.

Pasuk 2 introduces the festivals; pasuk 3 discusses Shabbat; and then Pasuk 4 introduces the festivals again. Why does the Torah interrupt the discussion of the festivals to mention Shabbat?

There are a number of possible answers. The Vilna Gaon provides a brilliant solution. He explains that pasuk 3 is not talking about Shabbat at all. It is actually talking about the festivals as well. The "6 days on which work is allowed" refers to the 6 days of the year that are festivals according to the Torah. In order to understand this, we need to remember that the second day of Yom Tov only applies outside of Israel and is Rabbinic in origin (i.e. it is not from the Torah). The 6 days listed in the Torah are: the first day of Pesach, the last day of Pesach, Shavuot, Rosh Hashanah,² the first day of Sukkot and Shmini Atzeret. On these 6 days we are allowed to do some forms of work for the purpose of the festival – we can cook, we can transfer fire and we can carry (even if there is no Eruv). The 7th day referred to in pasuk 3 (Shabbat Shabbaton) refers to Yom Kippur. This festival **is** a complete rest day without any work.³ In fact, Yom Kippur is referred to as "Shabbat Shabbaton" later on in the Parsha (Vayikra 23:22).

I would like to suggest another possible explanation as to why the Torah mentioned Shabbat in the middle of its discussion about the festivals. When it comes to the festivals, Hashem granted

¹ Those in Israel read Parshat Behar.

² Rosh Hashanah is actually celebrated for 2 days, even in Israel, but that was instituted by the Rabbis for historical and practical reasons. According to the Torah law Rosh Hashanah is only one day.

³ The word 'work' is used loosely. The real prohibition is 'melacha' which includes 39 specific categories of creative labour.

the Jewish people significant autonomy. The Bet Din would declare each new month based on witnesses that had seen the new moon. If no witnesses came in a particular month (eg because it was cloudy and no-one saw the moon) then the Bet Din would determine the date of the new month based on their mathematical calculations. The Bet Din would also decide whether a particular year would be a leap year or not⁴. The Bet Din would declare leap years to make sure that Pesach fell in the spring and for various other practical considerations. In this way, the Jewish people themselves determined the calendar and therefore whether a certain day would be a biblical festival, or not. This idea is captured in a Midrash⁵ - the angels ask Hashem when will be the holy days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Hashem responds to the angels: "Let's go and ask the Bet Din below on Earth". What an amazing level of autonomy Hashem has granted us.⁶

In contrast, we do not have any input into the dates of Shabbat. Shabbat occurs every 7 days, whether we like it or not.

Incidentally, that is the reason why the Kiddush for a festival evening that falls on Friday night says as follows: "Blessed are you Hashem, who sanctifies Shabbat, Israel and the festivals." Shabbat is mentioned first because it was the first to be sanctified and its sanctity comes from Hashem. Israel is then mentioned before the festivals because the sanctity of the festivals comes from us.

Perhaps this is why Hashem interrupts the description of the festivals to remind us about Shabbat. Hashem is investing us with the amazing ability to control the days of the festivals and thereby invest holiness into those days. But before He does so, he reminds us that all holiness ultimately comes from Him. Before we wield the power and the discretion that Hashem has invested in us, we need to humble ourselves and remind ourselves who is ultimately in charge.

This principle applies in all areas of our life. We humans have the amazing ability to conquer our environment, exploit the resources of our world, and dominate our surroundings. It is sometimes easy to forget that we are subject to a higher Source. Also in terms of moral behaviour and our interpersonal relationships, we are often tempted to believe that we know what is best. But we need to have the humility to recognise from Whom all our resources stem and to seek guidance for our actions. The only truly objective source is Hashem and the Torah. Anything else is subject to human biases, weaknesses and fallibility. As we get closer to Shavuot, we are reminded that the Torah is a gift that Hashem gave us at Har Sinai and it is the only true source of objectivity and emet (truth) in the world.

Let's try something this week:

1. If we are struggling with a dilemma or if we need some advice, we should humble ourselves and seek guidance from the Torah eg by asking a trustworthy Rabbi who is familiar with us and our circumstances.
2. When we are in a position to exercise authority or control, try to remind ourselves that we are just Hashem's agents in this world. All power, intellect, skills, talents and authority ultimately comes from Him.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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⁴ Leap years contain an extra month called Adar Bet.

⁵ Midrash Rabbah (Devarim 2:14).

⁶ These days, in the absence of the Bet Hamikdash, we use a fixed calendar which was established by Hillel II.

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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