

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Emor, May 2017

darchai.noam@gmail.com

How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Emor – the 48 qualities to acquire Torah

In this week's Parsha of Emor we read about the obligation to count the Omer. This is very timely considering that we are currently right in the middle of the Omer period.

“You shall count for yourselves from the day after the rest day [i.e. the first day of Pesach], from the day you bring the Omer as a wave offering, seven weeks, they shall be complete. You shall count until the day after the seventh week, fifty days, and you shall offer a new meal offering to Hashem [i.e. the Shavuot korban]” (Vayikra 23:15-16)

The 49 days of the Omer period parallel the time period between the Exodus from Mitzrayim and the giving of the Torah at Har Sinai. During this time Bnei Yisrael needed to elevate themselves so as to be on the level to merit receiving the Torah. These 49 days are a time of personal avodah, step by step growth and self-improvement.

Each day of the Omer represents a combination of seven divine sefirot which reflect a different aspect of our middot. Each day of the Omer is an opportunity to focus on that unique aspect of our characters. For example, the 32nd day of the Omer (which is Shabbat Parshat Emor) represents the Netzach component of Hod¹. On a very superficial level, Netzach represents triumph or tenacity and Hod represents humility or submission².

Alternatively, during this time leading up to Shavuot we can focus on the qualities through which one acquires Torah. The Mishnah in Pirkei Avot³ teaches that the Torah is acquired through 48 qualities. Thus, for the first 48 days of the Omer period we can choose one of the 48 qualities to work on. The 49th day of the Omer can then be spent revising and consolidating all of the previous 48 qualities. The fact that we need to spend an extra day revising the work that we did on the previous 48 days teaches us that we constantly need to work on improving our middot – we can never really say that the work is finished.

The 48 qualities include the following: humility, joy, serving Torah scholars, reducing business activity, reducing conversation, slowness to anger, a good heart, faith in the Sages, acceptance of suffering, being happy with one's lot, not claiming credit for oneself, being beloved, loving Hashem, loving Hashem's creations, keeping far from honour, not being arrogant, sharing in the suffering of others, judging others favourably, following the way of peace and giving proper credit when quoting someone. You are encouraged to read the entire list – you might find some of the qualities surprising!⁴

When we look at this list we see that many of the qualities relate to our relationships with each other – mitzvot ben adam l'chaveiro. Torah study is not simply an intellectual exercise. We need to work on improving our whole personality in order to acquire the Torah. After 49 days of working on themselves, Bnei Yisrael reached the level of being like “one man with one heart”.⁵ This demonstrates the importance of unity and interpersonal relationships in order to receive the Torah.

¹ See the table on page 286 of the standard Artscroll Ashkenaz siddur which sets out the sefirah for each day of the Omer.

² A detailed explanation of the sefirot and how they relate to our middot is beyond the scope of this article.

³ Avot 6:6.

⁴ The full list can be found on pages 583-585 of the standard Artscroll Ashkenaz siddur.

⁵ See Rashi to Shmot 19:2.

Someone once asked the Steipler Gaon why there is no specific mitzvah in the Torah obligating us to improve our middot. The Steipler Gaon replied that having good middot is a pre-condition to the Torah. Before we even receive the Torah it is assumed that we have already worked on improving our middot.

However, this does not suggest that we should ignore Torah study until we have perfected our middot! Learning Torah and improving middot are both life-long endeavours to be undertaken concurrently.

Generally, learning Torah should, and often does, result in the refinement of one's character. However it is important to remember that Torah study and knowledge alone does not guarantee good middot or character. Consider for instance Achitophel, a brilliant Torah scholar and adviser to David HaMelech. The Tanach testifies to Achitophel's brilliance: "*The advice of Achitophel that he advised in those days was as if someone would inquire of the word of G-d...*"⁶ However, Achitophel joined Avshalom in his ill-fated rebellion against David. He provided Avshalom with wicked and vicious advice. The Midrash explains that he was hoping that both David and Avshalom would die so that he could become king. When he saw that his advice was rejected, he committed suicide and was punished with losing his share in the World to Come⁷

How did such a great Torah scholar sink so low? This demonstrates that if one learns Torah for the wrong reasons and has no interest whatsoever in improving their character, then their learning may not have a positive impact on their middot. We need to learn Torah for the sake of improving ourselves and our characters. Torah learning can be a dry, intellectual exercise, or it can have a profound effect on our lives and change our habits, our daily choices, our direction and our focus. The choice is ours.

The following story about Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach demonstrates how genius in Torah study can be matched with impeccable middot.⁸

There was once a boy with a very pronounced speech impediment. He was painfully shy and socially awkward. As the boy's Bar Mitzvah approached, his father took it upon himself to teach the boy his Haftorah. It was a very long and difficult process. After many months of hard work the boy was finally ready. Shortly before the Bar Mitzvah, the father discovered that he had made a terrible mistake. He had not realised that the week of the Bar Mitzvah was a special week with a special Haftorah. Thus he had mistakenly taught his son the wrong portion! The poor boy would be devastated. The father did not know what to do. He consulted the leading posek of the generation – Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach. Rav Auerbach ruled that in the circumstances the boy could recite the Haftorah that he had learned. The father was relieved. However as the big day grew closer the father became concerned that there would be some 'well-meaning do-gooders' who would make a fuss when the incorrect portion was recited. This would cause embarrassment to the Bar Mitzvah boy. On the morning of the Bar Mitzvah, the family arrived bright and early at their shule in the Sanhedria neighbourhood of Jerusalem. They were surprised and delighted to see Rav Auerbach there. Rav Auerbach had understood that no-one would dare complain in his presence about the boy reading the wrong portion. So he made the very long and tiring trek from his home (well over an hour each way) in order to save the boy from embarrassment. But there is more to this story. There is one additional fact that puts this story into context and changes it from a nice story to a story of greatness. This event took place in the year before Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach's death. Rav Auerbach was 84 years old at the time!

Let's try something this week:

1. Remember that we need to focus on character refinement at the same time as we learn Torah.
2. We can use this time of the Omer period leading up to Shavuot to focus on improving the 48 qualities to acquire the Torah. There are many great resources available in this regard, for example: <http://www.aish.com/h/o/t/52829142.html>.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder.

⁶ Shmuel II, 16:23.

⁷ Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:1. See the full story in Chapters 15-17 of Shmuel II.

⁸ Heard from Rav Yammer, Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Shaalvim and a student of Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach.

*** **

About Darchai Noam

The pasuk 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.

If you know someone who might enjoy receiving this email please feel free to pass it on to them or email me their details so I can add them to the subscription list.

You are welcome to use the content of this email in any way that will help to spread the learning of Torah. However please attribute credit appropriately.

Many of the ideas that I use in Darchai Noam are based on ideas that I read or heard from various sources. Where possible I try to quote the source. However in some cases I cannot recall the source. For that I apologise. If I do discuss an idea that I heard from somewhere else, any errors are purely my own.

How to subscribe or unsubscribe

If you would like to subscribe or unsubscribe to Darchai Noam, please send an email to darchai.noam@gmail.com with the word ‘subscribe’ or ‘unsubscribe’ in the subject.