

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?

Bamidbar and Shavuot

In most years, the Parsha of Bamidbar is read in the week before Shavuot. This year, it is read the day before Shavuot. What is the connection between Parshat Bamidbar and Shavuot?

The word "Bamidbar" means "in the wilderness". The wilderness is a place that is uninhabited. It is a place of hefker – that is, there is no concept of private property or ownership. We discussed the concept of hefker in last week's Darchai Noam. During the Shemittah year the produce of the land is hefker – it is free for anyone to take. Thus the wilderness was chosen by Hashem as the place that we would receive the Torah precisely because He wanted the Torah to be considered hefker – free for anyone to take. The Torah is available to each and every one of us and it is free! We just have to want it. Imagine a precious treasure that is just left there in the street for anyone to take. It would be such a tragic waste to walk straight past and ignore it.

The Mishnah in Pirkei Avot 4:17 says:

Rabbi Shimon said: There are 3 crowns – the crown of Torah, the crown of Kehunah (priesthood) and the crown of kingship. But the crown of a good name surpasses them all.

Rabbeinu Yonah explains that the 3 crowns refer to the 3 forms of elevated status that Bnei Yisrael can achieve. Yet not everyone can receive the crown of Kehunah – this is limited only to Kohanim – that is, descendants of Aharon. And only a direct descendent of David HaMelech is in with a chance of ever receiving the crown of kingship. However everyone can achieve the crown of Torah.

The Omer period is the time that we prepare ourselves for receiving the Torah on Shavuot. Just as on Seder night we are obligated to see ourselves as if we are literally leaving Mitzrayim that very night, on Shavuot we need to imagine that we are literally receiving the Torah again that very day. There are a number of physical "props" that can help us achieve this state. Here are some of them:

- We decorate the shule with greenery to remind us of the greenery on Har Sinai.
- The Torah is read from the Bimah which is elevated and located in the centre of the shule (just like Har Sinai which was elevated and Bnei Yisrael camped around it).
- The Torah is carried from the Aron Hakodesh to the Bimah, which represents the word of Hashem coming down to Har Sinai from the heavens.
- Many have the custom to stand during the reading of the Ten Commandments; this represents Bnei Yisrael standing during the revelation at Har Sinai.

How can we prepare ourselves morally and spiritually to receive the Torah? One obvious way is to increase the time that we spend learning Torah. The time leading up to Shavuot is an opportune time to commit ourselves to take on some extra learning. It could be a new weekly shiur, or it could even be grabbing a couple of extra minutes per day to learn a few halachot. The important thing is that it is regular.

Another way to prepare ourselves to receive the Torah is to study Pirkei Avot Chapter 6, Mishnah 6¹. This Mishnah lists the 48 fundamental qualities which are a precondition to acquiring Torah – they are spiritual and moral values which make a person more able to absorb and retain Torah. Many of the

¹ See page 583 of the standard Artscroll Ashkenazi siddur.

qualities that are listed are good middot (character traits) – modesty, slowness to anger, a good heart, faith in the Sages, acceptance of suffering, knowing one’s place, being happy with one’s lot and judging others favourably. The first quality listed by the Mishnah is “talmud” which means learning. The obvious apparent meaning is learning Torah. If you want to acquire the Torah you need to learn it. But the Midrash Shmuel explains that it is referring to learning from other people.² We need to learn from everyone else – this includes learning Torah and also learning from the middot and actions of others. Being able to learn from everyone else teaches us to be humble.

The Vilna Gaon writes that the whole purpose of living is to improve our negative middot.³ Someone once asked the Steipler Gaon why there is no specific mitzvah in the Torah to improve our middot. The Steipler Gaon replied that having good middot is a pre-condition to the Torah. The Torah can only be really acquired by those who have already improved their middot. Of course this doesn’t mean that we can ignore Torah study until we have perfected our middot! Learning Torah and improving our middot are both life-long endeavours and we need to work on them both at the same time.

Let’s take another look at the first Mishnah that we quoted above. You may have noticed that Rabbi Shimon stated that there are 3 crowns, but he actually lists 4 crowns! The commentators explain that in contrast to the first 3 crowns, the crown of a good name is in a class by itself. A good name is achieved by someone whose good deeds and pleasant personality earn him the respect and affection of others. The other 3 crowns – Torah, Kehunah and kingship, all require a good name as well. Rashi explains that if you do not have a good name then the other crowns are useless.

How does one achieve a good name? Let’s look for some guidance from another Mishnah in Pirkei Avot (2:1):

Rebbe says: Which is the proper path that a person should choose for himself? Whatever is a credit to himself and earns him the esteem of his fellows.

A good barometer for judging our behaviour is to try to imagine how Hashem and other people will judge our behaviour. This is not referring to behaviour that achieves superficial popularity or that gives in to peer pressure. Deep inside our inner spiritual core we know what is the right way to behave and what actions will earn us the genuine esteem of others as well as our own self-respect. Some examples may be, acting in a pleasant manner, being fair and following the golden mean - avoiding extremism in all areas. However each situation is unique.

Out of the 4 crowns that Rabbi Shimon lists, the crown of Torah and the crown of a good name are available to all of us. Let’s grab them!

Let’s try something this week:

1. Review the middot listed in Mishnah 6, Chapter 6 of Pirkei Avot and choose one small thing to work on for this final week as preparation for receiving the Torah.
2. Before Shavuot, make a commitment to increase Torah learning in a small, regular way.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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² Seen in “48 Ways” by Rav Itamar Shwartz.

³ In his commentary to Mishlei (4:13).

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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