

**DARCHAI NOAM****Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם -**

(Mishlei 3:17)

Bechukotai, May 2014

[darchai.noam@gmail.com](mailto:darchai.noam@gmail.com)

How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

**Bechukotai – the blessings and the curses**

In this week's Parsha of Bechukotai, the last Parsha of the book of Vayikra, we read about the blessings that the Jewish people will receive for following the path of the Torah. This is followed by a very long list of terrible curses that will occur if we fail to follow the path of the Torah. Unfortunately, these curses have all eventuated during the history of our people.

Let's see what lessons we can learn from this list of blessings and curses.

**Why aren't the blessings enough?**

Hashem promises us that if we stay on the right path, we will have enough food to satisfy us, we will live in peace and security, we will be fruitful and Hashem's presence will dwell among us. One might presume that these blessings would be enough of an incentive to convince us to behave correctly. Why do we also need a long list of curses to provide us with extra incentive? Why does Hashem need to give us the stick as well as the carrot?

It is human nature to take things for granted. When things are going well, we are grateful at first. However after a period of time, we often start to acclimatise and fail to appreciate our blessings. We see this phenomenon whenever we acquire something, such as a new car. At the beginning we derive a lot of pleasure from our new acquisition. However this pleasure diminishes over time and we soon start to focus instead on our next acquisition. Perhaps the curses are also included in this week's Parsha because the blessings are insufficient incentive for us to stay focused.

The antidote to this phenomenon is for us to work on staying grateful for our blessings. The following is a suggestion for how we might be able to achieve this.<sup>1</sup>

There are many detailed laws about the Brachot that we say on food. Firstly, there are different brachot for different categories of food. It is not always clear into which category a given food will fall. For example, some types of berries require the bracha for fruit; other types of berries require the bracha for vegetables. In some cases, the intention of the person that planted the seed affects which bracha is correct. There are detailed laws to cover the correct order of saying the different brachot. Even within categories there is a priority – we favour the 7 types of fruit for which the land of Israel is blessed. Combinations of food add a whole level of complexity. What is the correct bracha on chocolate coated nuts? What about cholent? Mastering the intricate nature of these halachot can take a lot of time and effort.

One might wonder why there are so many details. Why can't we just have one bracha (such as Shehakol)? No matter what we are eating, we would just say 'thank you' to Hashem, and then eat!

The level of detail forces us to pause before we eat and provides us with an opportunity to think very carefully about what we are eating, where it comes from and how it was produced. Instead of just gobbling down our food without thinking, this process fosters appreciation and gratitude for our food. This may reduce the likelihood of us taking our food for granted.

<sup>1</sup> The following is based on an idea that was heard from Rabbi Guy Avihood, Rav Bet Midrash of Shaf Yativ, Jerusalem.

As an aside, stopping to think before we eat also ties it in with mindfulness, which is a relatively modern psychological theory about living in the present moment instead of worrying about the past or the future. The mindfulness approach can assist with mental health and overcoming depression. Not surprisingly the Torah knew about this idea thousands of years ago!

### **A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down**

Each Shabbat the Parsha is divided up between seven aliyot (people who get called up to the Torah). If we look at the size of the portions in this week's Parsha we will notice a surprising disparity. The first aliya (Cohen) is only three verses long and the second aliya (Levy) is only four verses long. The third aliya (Shlishi) is 37 verses long. Why is the third aliya this week so much longer than the first two portions? The third aliya is the portion that contains the long list of curses. The Rabbis deliberately set the length of the aliyot to ensure that this portion starts and ends on a positive note. So before the curses are read, there are four positive verses to act as a prelude. After the curses are read there are a few extra verses with a more positive message.

We can learn a lesson from this. If we need to give someone a negative message, it helps to bracket that message with something positive. Nobody likes to swallow bitter medicine, but if there is something a little sweet with that medicine it makes it more palatable. Following this approach can make it easier for the person to give over the message and can also make it more likely for the message to be well received by the recipient.

### **The power of numbers**

One of the blessings included in this week's Parsha is Hashem's promise to us that we will defeat our enemies:

*"Five of you will pursue a hundred, and a hundred of you will pursue ten thousand, and your enemies will fall by the sword before you." (Vayikra 26:8)*

Rashi points out that the maths does not add up. If 5 of us can pursue 100 people, that means that each of us can pursue 20 people. So 100 of us should be able to pursue 2,000 people, not 10,000 people as the pasuk says. Rashi explains that one cannot compare a small group that fulfils the Torah to a larger group that fulfils the Torah. The more people that are involved, the greater the effect.

In any venture, no matter what you can achieve by yourself, you can achieve more if you have the help of others. And as more people participate, the effect becomes magnified, and the results become exponentially greater.

Each of us can serve as powerful allies and help each other to achieve more growth, Torah learning and spirituality than we can achieve on our own.

Let's try something this week:

1. Say a bracha before eating that you wouldn't normally say. Take an extra moment and try to have some extra kavana (focus). We can then concentrate on how blessed we are before putting the food into our mouth.
2. If you are required to convey a negative message, remember to begin and end with something sweet.
3. Keep in mind the power of numbers. Every person that you come across can be a powerful ally and help you to achieve exponentially more than you can by yourself or in a small group.

Chazak, chazak venitchazek!

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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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 parsha 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'reiacha kamocho' – loving one's fellow as oneself.

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