

DARCHAI NOAM

Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם

(Mishlei 3:17)

Beha'alotcha, June 2015

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Beha'alotcha – the difference between wanting and needing

In this week's parsha of Beha'alotcha we read about Bnei Yisrael's dissatisfaction with the 'Man' (Manna), the miraculous bread from Heaven. "Who will feed us meat?" they complain. Hashem tells Moshe to tell the people that they shall eat meat. Not only for one or two days, but for an entire month they shall have their fill of meat, until it becomes sickening to them. This will be an ironic punishment for them for rejecting Hashem and crying before Him, saying "Why did we leave Egypt?" (Bamidbar 11:20).

The conversation that follows between Moshe and Hashem is difficult to understand:

Moshe said [to Hashem]: "There are 600,000 foot soldiers that I am amongst and You say that you will give them enough meat to eat for a month? Can sheep and cattle be slaughtered for them and it would suffice for them? If all the fish of the sea were gathered for them, would it be enough for them?"

Hashem said to Moshe: "Is my power limited? Now you will see whether My word will come true or not!" (Bamidbar 21-22)

This conversation took place after the ten plagues, the exodus from Mitzrayim, the splitting of the sea, the miraculous water from a rock and the manna from Heaven. Yet, on a superficial reading it sounds like Moshe is questioning Hashem's abilities! Could Moshe seriously be questioning Hashem's power?!?

The commentators deal with this question in a number of ways, for example:

- The first explanation brought by Rashi seems to suggest that Moshe was in fact really questioning Hashem's ability.
- The second explanation brought by Rashi is that Moshe knew that the wicked people would be punished with death and he was questioning why Hashem should reward them with meat before their deaths. Hashem responded that He didn't want the wicked people to think even for a moment that His power was limited.
- A third explanation (brought by Ibn Ezra among others) is that Moshe thought that the complainers did not deserve a miracle to be performed on their behalf and he thought that there was no *natural* way to provide enough meat.

Another explanation that has been suggested provides a powerful insight into human nature. The complainers were not asking for something that they needed. They had enough food to satisfy their physical needs. Rashi points out that there was no shortage of meat¹. Rather, they were asking for something that they *desired*. When it comes to desires there is no limit. It didn't matter how much Hashem would give them, they would always desire more. When Moshe questioned whether the food would be 'enough' he was not questioning Hashem's abilities or suggesting that Hashem's power was limited. Rather, Moshe was saying that people who are naturally dissatisfied with life and tend to

¹ Rashi to Bamidbar 11:4

complain will never be happy or satiated. It doesn't matter how much is provided, it will never be enough.

In the book of Kohelet, Shlomo Hamelech states "One who loves money will not be satisfied with money" (Kohelet 5:9). The Midrash on this passuk tells us "No person will die having accomplished even half of what he desires. A person who possesses 100 silver pieces desires 200. One who possesses 200 desires 400." If we don't control our desires, they will never be satisfied. We will find ourselves on a treadmill – constantly seeking to acquire more and more and never being happy with what we have.

Why is human nature like this? Why do we always want more? In a mystical sense, the source of this desire is that our neshama yearns to attach to Hashem. Hashem is infinite and we want infinity. However the yetzer hara hijacks this desire and channels it into the desire for physical possessions.

In the prayer of Ashrei which we recite three times a day, the most important passuk is "Poteach et yadecha" – "You [Hashem] open up Your hand and satisfy the desire of every person." How can we understand this passuk? We have just seen that people's desires are usually not satisfied!

We all want the absolute best for ourselves. The key is to realise that this is precisely what Hashem gives us. He gives us exactly what we need and what is best for us, even though at times it doesn't feel that way.

Imagine the case of a toddler that begs his mother for more and more lollies. Of course the mother will deny his request. The toddler will be devastated because he is not getting what he wants. However when the toddler grows up, and he has his health (and his teeth) he will be grateful that his mother gave him what he really needed. With a more mature outlook, he realises that what he thought he wanted at the time was actually no good for him.

We need to be very careful to differentiate between what we really need and what we want. Of course this outlook can be very difficult to achieve. It is usually impossible for us to understand how we have everything that we need. But this is the way to achieve happiness. As we learn in Pirkei Avot 4:1 "Who is rich? He who is happy with his lot".

The Chovot Halevavot (Duties of the Heart) quotes the following beautiful prayer that was recited by a righteous person after he finished davening²:

*"You know what is best for me and the ways in which I should be guided. I have informed You of my needs, not so as to call Your attention to them but that I may be conscious of my great need of You and of my trust in You. If I should ask You, in my ignorance, for something that is not good for me or of no benefit to me, Your exalted choice is better than my choice. And so I leave all my interests to Your lasting determination and superior governance."*³

Contemplating this prayer can help us to move more towards being happy with our lot and understanding the difference between how much we need and how much we want.

Let's try something this week:

1. Remind ourselves that Hashem satisfies all of our needs, whether we realise it at the time or not.
2. Try to be more in tune with how much we really need. Our happiness depends on this!

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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² The gate of self-accounting, chapter 3.

³ Based on the translation by Daniel Haberman in the Feldheim edition.

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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