

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Beha'alotcha
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darchai.noam@gmail.com
www.darchai-noam.com

How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Beha'alotcha – Grabbing the opportunity

In this week's Parsha of Beha'alotcha, we read about the job of lighting the menorah, a job that was reserved for the Kohanim. We then read about the ceremony to inaugurate the tribe of Leviim to their special service related to the Mishkan. Originally, the first born from every family was supposed to be privileged with this service in the Mishkan. However, their role was taken over by the Leviim and the Kohanim. Why did the Leviim and the Kohanim (who are a subset of the tribe of Leviim) deserve this special treatment?

The following story about the Chofetz Chaim may provide us with a clue:

One day the Chofetz Chaim was visited by a young Yeshiva student. The Chofetz Chaim asked him if he was a Kohen. The student replied that he was not. The Chofetz Chaim then told the student that he was a Kohen. He then asked the student if he knew why he was a Kohen but the student was not. The student said that the Chofetz Chaim was a Kohen because his father was a Kohen and the student was not a Kohen because his father was not a Kohen. The Chofetz Chaim then asked the student if he knew why one of the fathers was a Kohen while the other was not. The student was not sure what point the Chofetz Chaim was trying to make. The Chofetz Chaim explained that he was a Kohen because many years ago, after the sin of the golden calf, Moshe called out: "Whoever is for Hashem, come to me". The entire tribe of Levi responded to the call and ran to Moshe. For that reason, the tribe of Levi merited to take over the role of the first born and serve in the Mishkan.

The Chofetz Chaim had a group of learned Kohanim who were studying the Talmudic section of Kodashim – which contains the laws relating to the Bet Hamikdash and its service. Why were they engrossed in laws that are not currently applicable when there is so much other practical Torah to learn? The Chofetz Chaim understood that the Bet Hamikdash could be rebuilt any day – in which case these laws would then become practical and it would be critical to be familiar with them. When the Chofetz Chaim heard of the growing Jewish settlement in the land of Israel and when he heard that the land was yielding its fruit, he declared that the redemption was beginning. The Chofetz Chaim knew that it would be hard to find Kohanim who were well versed in the laws of sacrifices because the study of these laws had been neglected for a long time. The Chofetz Chaim therefore encouraged Kohanim to study Kodashim in order to prepare for the coming of the Moshiach.¹ In that way, when the Moshiach arrives, the Kohanim will again be completely ready to respond in the moment, without hesitation.

In the story quoted above, the Chofetz Chaim wasn't trying to boast to the young Yeshiva student. He was teaching him an important lesson. There will be times when the call comes out: "Whoever is for Hashem, come to me". When we hear that call, we have to grab the opportunity. If we wait too long, the opportunity can be lost.

¹ An Angel Among Men, Simcha Raz, Kol Mevaser Publications 2003.

This call has been heard throughout our history. For example, Matityahu said similar words when he began the rebellion against the Greeks in the story of Chanukah. But the call is not just heard at major historical incidents. We all face many such 'calls' and we must decide whether to side with Hashem. For instance, a friend of mine told me that he was out for Shabbat dinner and the host family did something against the halacha. It was not done in ignorance. It was done deliberately, in order to make a point. My friend could quite easily have remained silent, but he chose to say something politely so as not to give the act his tacit approval.

The Arizal used to go out into the fields around Tzfat with his students to welcome Shabbat. The story is told that one Friday afternoon he suddenly asked his students to travel with him to Jerusalem. They hesitated – it was getting close to Shabbat and they weren't sure that it was wise to travel so far. Eventually they decided that if the Arizal suggested it, then it must be a good idea. But by that time the Arizal said that they had lost their chance. They had a window of opportunity to reach amazing spiritual heights, but they had hesitated and the moment was lost.

With our social interactions and relationships, we sometimes need to act spontaneously in order to grab an opportunity to connect in a more meaningful way than usual. However, often it is difficult to pre-meditate a 'bonding moment' or the opportunity to do an act of thoughtful chessed. If so, how can we prepare ourselves to grab these opportunities? One way is to ensure that we spend more time with the people that are important to us so that we will be there to notice the opportunities when they arise.

Some people believe in the concept of "quality time". They spend many hours at work and very little time with their families. They make up for this by ensuring that the time that they do spend with their family is "quality time" - doing activities that are particularly enjoyable and which allow them to bond as quickly and efficiently as possible. However, we are rarely able to predict when special opportunities will arise for connecting with our loved ones. For instance, children are often very good at living in the moment. Children have a habit of asking deep, profound questions or being ready to connect or share something personal at unexpected times. Children can be extra receptive at these times and parents have an opportunity to connect with their children in a way that is not usually possible. These moments don't necessarily happen during the planned timeframe of "quality time".

In addition, the best way to teach a child, and help them to grow into a decent, respectful adult, is by example. Being a good role model is more important than being a good lecturer. Children need to see their parents behaving in a proper manner in all situations. Often, these opportunities tend to arise at unexpected times. You can't plan for them to occur during "quality time".

How can we make sure to grab as many of these opportunities as possible? One way is to be alert for these opportunities. Another simple solution is to be more available and present for our loved ones. We need to replace "quality time" with "quantity time". That way we will have a greater chance of being around when the opportunities come up.

Let's try something this week:

1. Watch out for Hashem's calls in our lives. We often know deep down what Hashem wants us to do in particular situations. But we must also be ready to take the plunge and respond to that call. If we hesitate, the opportunity can pass us by.
2. Try to replace "quality time" with "quantity time" and be open to potential bonding moments every day.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder