

DARCHAI NOAM

Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם

(Mishlei 3:17)

Chukat, June 2014

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Chukat – Self-sacrifice to help others

In this week's Parsha of Chukat, we read about the law of the Parah Adumah – the red cow that was used in the procedure for purifying people from tumat met (the impurity associated with a dead body).

The Parah Adumah is the quintessential chok – a law of the Torah that makes no rational sense. The wise Shlomo Hamelech tried to understand the meaning behind this mitzva but he was not able to. He alluded to this when he wrote: "I said I will become wise but it is beyond me" (Kohelet 7:23).

The pasuk describing the beginning of the Parah Adumah procedure is found in Bamidbar 19:17:

"They shall take for the person that is tamei from the ashes of the burnt offering [i.e. the Parah Adumah] and place it in a vessel that is filled with spring water."

Shlomo thought that he would be able to decipher the meaning behind the mitzva because his name is spelled by re-arranging the initials of the four main words in this pasuk. However, the Chida explains that when the letters are read in the correct order, they spell the word "L'Moshe" (to Moshe). This shows that the deep meaning of this mitzva was only revealed to Moshe¹.

The main difficulty with understanding this mitzva is that ashes of the Parah Adumah were used to make someone pure, yet ironically, the people involved in preparing the ashes would become impure!² How could the same ashes cause an impure person to become pure and a pure person to become impure?

Rav Soloveitchik explains that a tamei individual can be compared to a person sinking in quicksand. His rescuers inevitably become soiled in the process of rescuing him.³ This idea is often used as an analogy for people involved in kiruv. In order to bring an unaffiliated Jew back to the right path one often needs to expose oneself to negative influences. This suggests that sometimes we may need to compromise our own level of purity to a degree in order to help our fellow Jews.⁴

R' Chaim Kanievsky is one of the gedolei hador, one of the greatest Torah scholars alive today. Each year, on erev Pesach, he makes a siyum on the entire Torah (the entire Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi, Tosefta, Sifri, Mishnayot, Shulchan Aruch, Rambam, plus more). In a leap year, Rav Kanievsky uses the extra month to write an additional sefer with his insights and chidushim. Every second of Rav Kanievsky's day is accounted for and used to its full potential. Remarkably, Rav Kanievsky spends hours each day seeing visitors. Every day, after Mincha, a

¹ Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah 19:6.

² Sefer Hachinuch, mitzva 397. The people involved in the preparations did not become impure to the same degree as the people whose impurity was being removed by the procedure.

³ See: http://www.ou.org/torah/machshava/tzarich-iyun/tzarich_iyun_the_parah_adumah/

⁴ As an aside, the extent to which one becomes involved in kiruv is a complicated question which requires much thought and guidance. The answer will partly depend on how strong one is in their own belief. Also, having certain people in our homes may be a negative influence for our children.

long queue builds up outside the Rav's apartment. Some people have halachik questions, some people want to receive advice, some people want a blessing, and some people just want to meet a Torah giant. Surely Rav Kanievsky's time can be "better spent" pursuing loftier spirituality by studying more Torah or writing more books. However, every day Rav Kanievsky chooses to selflessly and patiently see each of his visitors and to answer the many letters that he receives, even though it takes his time away from pure Torah learning. By making this choice, it seems that Rav Kanievsky is sacrificing his own spiritual development in order to reach out to his fellow Jews and help them in whatever way that he can. This is typical behaviour of many Gedolim.

How can this concept apply to us? Sometimes when we are involved in rest and recreation, someone interrupts us and asks for help. Unless it is critical that we rest at that time, it is usually appropriate for us to interrupt our activity and lend a hand.

But what if we are involved in a mitzva and another one arises? The answer is not necessarily as clear. For instance, if we are busy preparing for Shabbat on a Friday afternoon and someone knocks on our door asking for money, should we take the time to speak to them in a respectful manner and offer them a drink or something to eat? If we are busy learning Torah and a friend needs us to come over and lend them a hand, should we interrupt our learning? Should we allow people to borrow our lulav and etrog on Sukkot even though they are known to be careless and the lulav and etrog might be damaged as a result? These questions are very real and very practical. The right answer often varies with each individual and each set of circumstances.

There is a halachik concept of mitzva haba'ah b'aveira – we cannot fulfil a mitzva through a sin. For example, we cannot fulfil the mitzva of lulav and etrog with a stolen set. Perhaps this concept is somewhat relevant here as well. If we are trying to learn Torah at the expense of helping our fellow Jew; if we ignore a beggar in order to continue cleaning the house for Shabbat, then perhaps the mitzva that we are trying to fulfil will be somewhat tainted. Perhaps focusing only on our own performance of a mitzva at the expense of our fellow Jews, defeats the purpose of our spiritual growth.

There is another halachik principle of osek b'mitzva patur min hamitzva. If we are involved in one mitzva then we are exempt from performing other mitzvot. However this principle only operates under certain criteria. For example, if we are doing a mitzva that is not time bound (like learning Torah) and we have the opportunity to do another mitzva that needs our immediate attention and cannot be fulfilled by someone else (like helping a beggar that knocks on our door) then we should put aside our Torah study to attend to that mitzva.

Ultimately though, this comes down to emunah. If we are involved in our own spiritual development and an opportunity arises to help someone else, then Hashem probably wants us to attend to that other mitzva at that time. We need to learn to see Hashem's guiding hand in our lives, rather than trying to do what we think is right. If we pay attention, we will notice our ego trying to control the situation. However we should try to realise that Hashem is ultimately in charge.

Let's try something this week:

1. When we have the opportunity to help someone, but we are concerned that our own spirituality might suffer, let's remember the lesson of the Parah Adumah and the example of Rav Chaim Kanievsky.
2. Notice ourselves struggling to decide which action Hashem wants us to take and realise that this struggle is part of our growth.

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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