

## 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?

### Chukat – different types of mitzvot

In this week's parsha we read about the law of the Parah Adumah – the 'red cow' whose ashes were mixed with water and sprinkled on impure people in order to purify them. This law is considered the quintessential "chok" or decree of the Torah – that is, a law that is beyond our ability to understand.

The mitzvot of the Torah can be divided into 3 categories:

- "Mishpatim" – laws that make logical sense such as "do not steal" or "do not murder". Arguably, we could have come up with these laws ourselves, even if Hashem did not command them.
- "Chokim" – laws which make no sense to us, such as kashrut or the prohibition against wearing shatnez (mixtures of wool and linen). We accept these mitzvot as Divine decrees and we perform them just because Hashem commanded us to do so.
- "Eidot" (testimonials) – these are half way between Mishpatim and Chokim. They are laws that commemorate or represent something, for example eating matza on Pesach. We would never devise such laws independently. However once their meaning is explained to us we can understand the rationale.

In his commentary to Devarim 22:6, the Ramban says that there are two approaches to understanding chokim. One opinion is that we should accept chokim as a Divine decree without trying to understand its reasons (eg Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi in the Kuzari). The other opinion, favoured by the Rambam, is that we should try our best to find reasons for all of the mitzvot.

There are arguments to support both opinions. On the one hand, analysing each mitzva to the best of our ability to try to discover as many explanations and reasons as possible may bring the mitzvot to life and enable us to perform them with more passion. If we look upon mitzvot as empty rituals then we may fall into the trap of just carrying them out in a mechanical manner using only our bodies but not our hearts. Ideally, our hearts should be engaged and we should be passionate simply because we know that by performing the mitzvot we are fulfilling Hashem's will. However, for most of us, our passion for performing a mitzvah is greatly enhanced if it is supported by a logical reason.

On the other hand, if we think that we understand the reason for a mitzvah, we may start to rationalise the mitzvah and look for a "better" way to achieve the same outcome. If the reason that we learned for the mitzvah's existence no longer applies then we may conclude that we are exempt from performing it. For example, some people claim that pig products are forbidden for health reasons. Indeed, it is true that consuming undercooked pork can cause a disease called trichinosis. Those people may then claim that modern hygienic practices and proper preparation mean that the health concerns are no longer relevant today. Therefore, they would argue, the prohibition on pork consumption should no longer apply. However, the truth is that health reasons may be a reason for kashrut, but they are certainly not **the** reason.

The Hebrew term used for "reasons for the mitzvot" is "taamei hamitzvot". The literal meaning of "taam" is taste. Why would we describe the reason for a mitzva as the taste of the mitzvah?<sup>1</sup> The main reason that we eat food is because we need energy and nutrients. Without food we could not

<sup>1</sup> Heard from Rabbi Dovid Tsap.

live. We also enjoy the taste of the food. If the only food that we had was tasteless, we would still eat it because we need it. However Hashem has blessed us with tasty food so that we can also have pleasure from eating.

Similarly, the ultimate reason that we should perform the mitzvot is purely because Hashem told us to do so. We need to follow Hashem's commandments. That can be equated to eating purely for the energy and the nutrients. However, through the oral law, the Rabbinic commentaries and the Midrashim etc, Hashem has also revealed reasons for the mitzvot and lessons that we can learn from studying the details of the mitzvot. These explanations are not the sole, underlying reason that we perform the mitzvot, but they make mitzvah performance more "tasty".

The Beit HaLevi states that when Shlomo HaMelech couldn't understand the meaning behind the Parah Adumah he realised that he also did not fully understand the other mitzvot. The Beit HaLevi explains that the whole Torah is a chok. All of the mitzvot are really divine decrees that we can't fully understand. On the other hand, all mitzvot have reasons that we can try to grasp.

All mitzvot have an aspect of "chok" and an aspect of "mishpat". The mitzvot can be considered as lying on a spectrum. Some mitzvot seem to make more sense to us. These mitzvot are closer to the side of "Mishpatim". The mitzvot that are harder to understand are closer to the side of "Chokim".

This has two ramifications:

- All the mitzvot that we consider to be chokim contain many lessons that we can learn. We can try to discover the rationale behind the chokim, provided that we don't fall into the trap of thinking that we understand their real reason.
- Even the mitzvot that we consider to be mishpatim, and appeal to us logically, should really be viewed as chokim. Even though we think we understand the reason behind these mitzvot, we must remind ourselves to perform them just because Hashem commanded us to do so.

Another point to note. Even the mishpatim that make the most sense to us contain elements of chok in their practical application. For example, we can all agree that "do not murder" is an obvious law, which we (hopefully) could have worked out independently even if Hashem did not command us. However, what about euthanasia? What about abortion? In what circumstances would they fall within the category of murder and in what circumstances would they be allowed? These are very difficult questions. Human reason is usually not adequate to provide definitive answers for such questions. We need to turn to the Torah (and the great Rabbis of the generation) to discover the exact parameters of what constitutes 'murder' in such cases. Similarly, we would all agree that if we found a lost item in the street, the right thing to do is to return it to its true owner. But how can we know exactly how much effort to expend to find the true owner and when it should be permitted to keep the item for ourselves? We all agree that stealing is wrong. But what if we need to steal to save someone from being harmed? Again, we need the Torah to define the exact parameters.

Generally, the mitzvot between man and man can be categorised as Mishpatim. We may think that they make sense and we can leave them to the realm of human reason. However it is vital to remember that whether or not a mitzvah appeals to our human intellect we ultimately must perform it simply because Hashem commanded us to do so.

Let's try something this week:

1. We can try to investigate the meaning behind the mitzvot in order to enhance their 'taste' and appeal to our human intellect.
2. Even when we perform a mitzvah that makes logical sense to us (like the mitzvot between man and man) keep in mind that ultimately we are performing it solely because Hashem commanded us to.

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 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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