

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Chukat
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Parashat Chukat – How to acquire Torah

The main theme of this week's Parsha of Chukat seems to be death. We read about the laws of impurity (tumah) relating to a corpse. We read about the death of Miriam and Aharon. We read of Moshe's sin of hitting the rock, whereby Moshe is told that he would die before entering the Land of Israel. We also read about the death of many members of Bnei Yisrael as a punishment for complaining. However, the Parsha also contains the antidote to death – the Parah Aduma, whose ashes could be used to purify someone who had become impure from coming into contact with a dead body.

The Parsha teaches us details regarding the tumah of death and how it can spread. For example, it distinguishes between the tumah caused by a corpse that is in a building or tent and that of a corpse that is out in the open. In relation to the laws of impurity from a corpse located in a tent, the Torah states:

“This is the Torah regarding a man who would die in a tent.” (Bamidbar 19:14)

The Torah goes on to explain that the impurity fills the tent and infects those people and things that are located in the tent. (The same halacha applies to buildings which explains why Kohanim have to be careful about entering a hospital.¹)

However, in the Gemara,² Raish Lakish provides an alternative interpretation of the above-quoted pasuk. Raish Lakish says that we can derive from this pasuk the teaching that the words of Torah are only retained by someone who ‘kills himself’ over Torah. He changes the emphasis of the words slightly to provide a totally different meaning: “This is Torah. A man who dies in a tent”. A tent is a Torah euphemism for a place of Torah learning. That is why Yaakov was described as a man who dwelled in tents³. Reish Lakish is saying that for one to truly acquire Torah, one has to die for it!

This isn't meant to be taken literally, as life is infinitely precious in Judaism. Raish Lakish is teaching us that we must exert ourselves with all of our life force to acquire Torah. There are many stories of great Torah scholars who devoted themselves to Torah study with incredible tenacity and self-sacrifice.

- The Gemara (Shabbat 88a) brings the story of Rava who was so deeply engrossed in his studies that he did not even realise that he was sitting on his own fingers and crushing them to the extent that they were flowing with blood.
- There are many stories of Torah scholars placing their feet in a bucket of cold water to keep awake so that they could learn Torah through the night.
- Rav Chaim Kanievsky was once making a cup of tea. He placed the kettle under the tap and left it there to fill up. He didn't want to waste a precious moment of Torah study so he grabbed a sefer. He was soon so engrossed in his learning that he forgot about the kettle until there was a flood in the kitchen!

¹ Kohanim are generally forbidden from becoming impure. In Israel, hospitals have a warning sign for Kohanim outside the building. If a patient dies, the sign is lit up to warn Kohanim not to enter.

² Brachot 63b.

³ Breishit 25:27 with Rashi's commentary.

- As a child, one of the Torah greats was known for his amazing ability to concentrate in Torah learning for long periods of time. His head was almost always in a sefer. His friends decided to play a trick on him. They told him that the Yeshiva was moving to a new building and he had to leave his desk. He dutifully got up, his nose still in his sefer, and followed his friends to a carriage outside. The carriage did a small circuit around the town and returned to the same building. He walked in, sat down, and continued learning. His friends then asked him what he thought of the new Bet Midrash. He looked up from his book for a moment, looked around and said “It’s nice, Baruch Hashem”. And then continued with his intense concentration for his Torah learning.

These are amazing stories. However, in truth most of us probably feel that they are not relevant to us. We may think that we are not on that level or that we live in different times. However, whether or not our potential matches the potential of these Torah giants, we can almost certainly stretch ourselves further. How do we know? We just need to look at how much effort and determination and self-sacrifice we devote in other areas of our lives. If something is really important to us, we often discover very deep reserves of energy and abilities. The question is, is Torah important enough for us to make such an effort?

The Midrash⁴ brings the following story:

One day Eliyahu HaNavi encountered an unlearned man who started to mock him. Eliyahu asked the man why he didn't learn Torah. What would he answer in the World to Come when he was asked why he didn't learn? The man replied that he had a good excuse - he did not have the mental ability to learn. Therefore, the man was confident that it was not his fault that he didn't learn, rather it was Hashem's fault! Eliyahu asked the man what he did for a living. The man replied that he was a fisherman. Eliyahu then asked him about how he made his nets and how he succeeded in catching fish. The man replied in intricate detail about the procedure for making a good net and all of the complex factors that went in to catching fish – understanding water currents, feeding and breeding habits of fish, environmental conditions, etc. Eliyahu replied: “For fishing you obviously have great wisdom. But for Torah you don't have wisdom?!?” The fisherman realised that he was acting hypocritically and he burst into tears. Eliyahu reassured him by telling him that it's never too late to start learning!

Torah is Hashem's wisdom, the most precious gift and the blueprint for life. Torah provide us with the ability to gain an insight into Divine wisdom! If we truly internalise how precious Torah is, we will gladly exert ourselves to the maximum extent of our abilities.

This concept doesn't just apply to learning Torah, it applies to all forms of our Divine service – prayer, keeping the mitzvot, performing acts of kindness and trying our best to be a good Jew. If we are wise enough to see the true and permanent value of Divine service, we will gladly love it and pursue it with all of our hearts, souls and resources.

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to notice how much we exert ourselves to chase after what is truly important to us – it could be money, possessions, honour or popularity. Even if these desires are permissible they may still divert our attention from our Divine service.
2. Try to redirect some of our effort towards our service of Hashem.
3. To increase our motivation, it helps to contemplate how precious is Hashem's Torah, how privileged we are to be involved in Divine service and how only Torah and mitzvot have lasting value in the World to Come.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁴ Tanna d'vei Eliyahu.