

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Korach – simple faith

In this week’s Parsha of Korach we read about an attempted coup. Korach tries to undermine Moshe in a bid to take over the leadership. Korach gathers a mixed group of supporters and challenges Moshe with some derisive questions about the mitzvot. Underlying his questions was an implicit denial of the Divine origin of the mitzvot.

One of Korach’s questions¹ related to the requirement to wear a thread of t’chelet (blue wool) in one’s tzitzit.² He and his followers dressed in clothes made entirely of blue wool and asked Moshe whether they still needed a blue thread in their tzitzit. When Moshe responded in the affirmative, they began to laugh at him. If the whole purpose of the blue wool is to remind us of the heavens and to think about Hashem, then surely a cloak made entirely of blue wool should be sufficient!

He also questioned the requirement to attach a mezuzah to one’s doorpost. If a house was filled with Torah scrolls, does it still need a mezuzah? They laughed at Moshe when he again answered in the affirmative. Since a mezuzah only contains two portions of the Torah, surely a house filled with complete scrolls of the Torah should be exempt from this mitzvah.

In truth, there are answers to Korach’s questions.³ There are also deep Kabbalistic ideas behind all of the details of the mitzvot. However, the fact there are answers to these questions is beside the point. Though it is a mitzvah to study Torah and try our best to plumb the depths of the mitzvot, whether or not we understand the mitzvot is irrelevant to our performance of the mitzvot. We perform the mitzvot simply because Hashem said so, and we must not reject a mitzvah simply because it does not make sense or appeal to our own fallible, human logic.

As Yeshayahu teaches:

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not My ways, says Hashem. Just like the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My way higher than your ways and My thoughts higher than your thoughts” (Yeshayahu 55:8-9).

Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan explains that Hashem operates on a level that is above logic.⁴ Hashem himself cannot be grasped. We have neither the words nor the intellect with which to actually describe Hashem or understand Him. Although we experience Hashem and approach Him in prayer, there is simply no way that we can imagine Him.⁵ To reject Hashem’s mitzvot based on

¹ Midrash Rabbah and Tanchuma on Parshat Korach.

² The wool must be dyed from the ink that comes from a sea creature known as the chilazon. We are no longer able to identify the correct creature and therefore the obligation is no longer in force. That is why most people only use white string in their tzitzit. There are some authorities that claim to have rediscovered the chilazon and therefore there are some who wear tzitzit with a blue thread.

³ One answer that has been suggested is that we place a mezuzah on the door so that we are reminded of Hashem and his Torah precisely as we enter and leave our homes.

⁴ Inner Space, footnote 53 to chapter 11.

⁵ Inner Space, page 97.

our own limited intellect is chutzpah. It represents a failure to comprehend that we cannot really understand and that the true reason for mitzvah performance is simply and only because Hashem told us to.

The Torah requires us to have simple faith – temimut⁶.

“You shall be tamim with Hashem your G-d” (Devarim 18:13)

In his commentary to this verse, Rashi explains that through temimut we can achieve closeness with Hashem. Achieving temimut is critical. When we are faced with difficult tests we cannot rely on our intellect to carry us through. Our mental faculties often don't perform well under severe pressure. Ultimately, all we can rely on is our simple faith. And that's what Hashem wants us to do.

Rabbi Lawrence Keleman⁷ discusses the phenomenon of the righteous gentiles during the Holocaust. He explored why some non-Jews risked their lives to save Jews, while others turned a blind eye to what was happening. Rabbi Keleman noticed that it was often the simple, uneducated people who helped their Jewish neighbours. They recognised that what was happening was wrong, and they felt that they needed to do something. He suggests that the more sophisticated and educated citizens were more easily able to rationalise the events based on their intellects and thus justify their non-action.⁸

Rabbi Greenwald⁹ points out that the average Yeshiva student today can easily access and amass much more information and Torah knowledge than their grandparents. However, they are often not even close to achieving the simple faith of their ancestors.

Rabbi Greenwald offers a number of practical suggestions to achieving simple faith. These include:

- Talk about emunah. Merely saying the words out loud can have a positive effect on us. This may be why many of the mitzvot dealing with emunah involve speech (for example, reciting the Shema, relating the story of the Exodus on Seder night).
- Learn Chumash with Rashi. This can help us to see how Hashem runs the world and build up the foundations of our emunah.
- Study nature. Rav Avigdor Miller teaches that investigating the intricacy and beauty of the natural world increases our awe of the incredible wisdom of Hashem's physical world.
- Talk to Hashem. The Chofetz Chaim encouraged people to talk to Hashem like they speak to their father and express their feelings in their own words. This leads to a feeling that Hashem's presence is tangible.

Let's try something this week:

1. When things do not seem to make sense, remember that Hashem is in charge and our intellect is limited. The fact that something does not make sense to us may be frustrating but ultimately we should strive to serve Hashem with temimut, simplicity.
2. Try to adopt some of the suggestions listed above in order to boost our levels of simple faith.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder.

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⁶ The following ideas are based on “Emunah, our lifeline in turbulent times” by Rabbi Yisroel Greenwald.

⁷ Heard in a lecture in Melbourne in 2013.

⁸ This is obviously a generalisation and there are certainly exceptions.

⁹ “Emunah, our lifeline in turbulent times”, page 61.

About Darchai Noam

The pasuk 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 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’re’echa kamocho’ – loving one’s fellow as oneself.

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