

## DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

### “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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

### Parashat Devarim – You can't have your cake and eat it too

In this week's Parasha, we begin sefer Devarim, which covers the last 36 days of Moshe's life. Before Moshe died, he took the opportunity to impart final teachings to his beloved people. He included a summary of the important historical events that had impacted Bnei Yisrael, including unfavourable events, such as the sin of the golden calf and the sin of the spies. Moshe also rebuked Bnei Yisrael a number of times during these last days. The question arises – to whom was Moshe directing his rebuke? He was speaking to a new generation. Those that had sinned had already died during the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. Why did their children deserve to be rebuked for sins that they personally did not commit?<sup>1</sup>

There is a concept known as zechut avot, whereby we benefit from the merits our righteous ancestors. Jews throughout the ages have been saved from Divine retribution through invoking the merits of the Avot. The Gemara<sup>2</sup> brings an opinion that these merits are still available to protect us, and another opinion that these merits have now been used up.<sup>3</sup> But even according to the second opinion, there is still an aspect of zechut avot that continues until this very day, and we rely on those merits heavily. We invoke this merit often throughout our daily tefillot. Also on Rosh Hashana, when we blow the shofar, we remember Akeidat Yitzchak – and draw upon the merit of this seminal event. Tosefot suggests two possible explanations for the opinion that the merits have been used up – he explains that even though the merit of the Patriarchs has expired, the covenant that Hashem made with them still continues and still protects us; or alternatively, he explains that the merit has only expired in that it no longer protects the wicked, but the righteous are still shielded. Either way, it is certainly a relief knowing that we can petition Hashem and rely on the Avot's merits to help us.

But it goes both ways. The Sfat Emet explains that every generation is also required to repair the sins of the previous generations. We can't just draw on the merits of the earlier generations without also taking responsibility for their sins. We can't have our cake and eat it too! This principle is seen in the well known Gemara that is often quoted around this time of year – “Any generation in which the Bet Hamikdash is not rebuilt is considered as if they destroyed it”.<sup>4</sup> If we don't take repair the sins of the previous generations, then we are held accountable for them. That is why Moshe was rebuking the next generation of Bnei Yisrael, even though they personally did not commit the sins. Their job was to rectify the underlying faults of their ancestors to ensure that such sins would not be repeated.

Interestingly, we can contrast Moshe's words of rebuke with his words of appeasement and justification immediately after the sins took place. After the sin of the Golden Calf for instance, Moshe defended Bnei Yisrael and did his best to minimise and excuse their sins. The Gemara claims that Moshe's prayers on behalf of Bnei Yisrael bordered on impertinence!<sup>5</sup> For Moshe even tried to explain the Golden Calf by claiming that it was Hashem's fault for giving Bnei Yisrael too much gold!

<sup>1</sup> The discussion of this issue was inspired by an article in "The Short Vort" by Rabbi Moshe Kormornick.

<sup>2</sup> Shabbat 55a.

<sup>3</sup> Rav's opinion is that the merits have been used up. R' Yochanan holds that the merits have not been used up.

<sup>4</sup> Yersuhalmi, Yoma 5a.

<sup>5</sup> Brachot 32a.

Moshe changed his message and his tone depending on to whom he was speaking. When Moshe spoke to Hashem, he was acting as the defence attorney for Bnei Yisrael. He did whatever he could to appease Hashem and save Bnei Yisrael from punishment. However, in contrast, when Moshe rebuked the people, he was acting as their coach, trying to help them be the best that they can be. In this role, Moshe was required to focus in on the faults so that the people knew what to work on. How else could they reach their potential?

Rabbi Akiva Tatz offers a beautiful analogy to put these ideas into the proper perspective. Imagine a child who was always perfectly behaved and always received 100% on every test at school. One day he came home from school with a 97% and he said an unkind word to his younger brother. His parents see that he is not living up to his potential and they rebuke him harshly. Objectively, the boy is on an extremely high level. But his parents know that he could be even better, and they push him to reach his potential.

Rabbi Tatz then takes the analogy a step further. Imagine the neighbour walks past and hears the parents rebuking their child. He wants to join in the fun, so he enters the house and starts to hit the boy! The parents are horrified and tell him to stop. "What do you think you are doing?" they ask. "Well I saw you rebuking the child so I thought I could join in!" "You fool", they reply, "we're rebuking the child out of love, because we know what he is capable of achieving and we want him to be the best that he can be. You are hitting him out of pure malice".

In this parable, the neighbour represents the other nations of the world. They see the Jewish people being rebuked by the prophets and they are only too keen to join in the fun. But they rebuke us out of malice and jealousy. The prophets rebuke us out of love and a desire to help us reach our potential.

Rabbi Tatz also points out that the generation of the Midbar are often seen as sinful, backsliding and wicked, repeatedly testing Hashem and making the lives of Moshe and Aaron difficult. It certainly sounds that way when we read the account of that time in the Torah. However, if we add up all of these sins, we see that Bnei Yisrael only sinned ten times during the entire 40 year period<sup>6</sup>. That's an average of once every four years! How amazing would it be if we only sinned once every four years! Yet Moshe still rebuked them because they could have been even better.

We are the children of our holy and righteous Avot and Imahot and we are capable of reaching amazing heights. We have been gifted with their spiritual potential and we are protected in their merit. But we also have to work for this zechut by rectifying the sins of our ancestors and not perpetuating them. Let's live up to our potential!

Let's try something this week:

1. Remember that Moshe was rebuking the next generation because they were responsible for the sins of the previous generation. That rebuke continues to apply to us today, as long as we are perpetuating those sins and not acting in a way that leads to the rebuilding of the Bet Hamikdash.
2. Remember, if we want to rely on our ancestors' merits, we also need to strive to rectify their faults.
3. Let's put it all into the proper perspective – remember R' Tatz's beautiful analogy and what we are capable of achieving.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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<sup>6</sup> Pirkai Avot 5:4 and Bamidbar 14:22.