

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Ekev (Devarim 7:12–11:25)
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Ekev – the importance of the little things

This week's Parsha begins with Moshe encouraging Bnei Yisrael to keep Hashem's mitzvot. In return, Hashem will then show them kindness and shower them with blessings.

And it will be, because you listen to these laws and keep them, and perform them, Hashem your G-d will keep the covenant and the kindness that he promised to your forefathers. And he will love you and bless you and multiply you and he will bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your land, your grain, your wine, your oil and the offspring of your flocks on the land that he promised your forefathers to give to you.

(Devarim 7:12-13)

The Parsha is called 'Ekev' – because Moshe said “And it will be, because ('Ekev') you will listen...”. Rashi explains that the word Ekev also means heel and that this is a reference to the seemingly minor commandments that we trample with our heels – i.e. the mitzvot which are considered to be 'less important'. Thus, it is especially the seemingly inconsequential mitzvot which we need to keep to be worthy of the promised blessings referred to above.¹

Admittedly, many of us consider (either consciously or subconsciously) some of the mitzvot to be 'minor' and of less importance than others. However, the Mishnah warns us:

“...Be as careful with a minor mitzvah as with a major mitzvah, because we do not know the reward given for each of the mitzvot...” (Pirkei Avot 2:1)

Hashem does not reveal the specific rewards for the each of the mitzvot. Perhaps one reason for this is that people may otherwise only focus on those mitzvot that earn a greater reward. Instead, we should endeavour to perform as many of the mitzvot as possible, regardless of the reward. This is because ideally, we should be performing the mitzvot 'lishma' – as much for Hashem's sake as possible and not for the reward per se. Actually, the connection that we develop with Hashem by doing the mitzva with the right intention **is** part of the reward.

Since the relationship with Hashem is the main focus, it is specifically the little acts that can have the most profound impact. It is just like a husband and wife who have been married for many years and know each other's quirks and habits. It is a sign of their familiarity and bond that they know the little details without being told, such as how their spouse likes their coffee. Similarly, it is a sign of our relationship with Hashem that we know how He wants us to behave in all circumstances – how He likes us to wash our hands in the morning and even how He likes us to tie our shoelaces!

The message of the word “Ekev” also applies when it comes to inter-personal relationships. It is easy to overlook the small gestures, the seemingly unimportant actions. However, we often cannot predict the effect of our actions. Sometimes the smallest actions can have the most profound effect.

¹ Needless to say, how much more so do we need to keep those mitzvot that we think are “more important”.

The following story shows how a simple greeting and a little friendship can have a massive influence on the world of Torah study.²

Leonard Kaplan was a street kid. At the age of 14 he was expelled from school for causing trouble. He left home after his mother's untimely death because his father couldn't cope with raising him and his sisters. The family had very little connection to Judaism but someone told him that he should say kaddish for his mother. He was directed to a local house that had a small daily minyan. The elderly men davening at the minyan barely paid any attention to Len. But the baal koreh, an Orthodox teenager that was paid to read from the Torah, convinced Len to say kaddish in a proper shule. He brought Len to his own shule in the East Bronx. Len stood out. He didn't have tefillin, he didn't open a siddur, he didn't daven and his kippah clearly spent more time folded up in his pocket than on his head. But when the time came for kaddish, Len stood up and recited it by heart. Hanoch Rosenberg was also 14 years old. Hanoch was a Klausenberger chassid. He came to the same shule with his 3 brothers. He had very little in common with this street kid and he could quite easily have ignored him. However, he decided to say hello and be friendly. In doing so, he discovered that Len didn't open the siddur because he didn't know how to read Hebrew. Hanoch and his brothers decided to teach Len themselves. Len learnt fast. Extremely fast. Hanoch didn't know that Len had a genius IQ. Within days he was learning Chumash and after 3 weeks he could learn a page of Gemara. Hanoch's parents welcomed Len into their home and eventually Len joined Hanoch's Yeshiva. Within a year he was a talmid chacham. Leonard Kaplan went on to become the great Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan. In his short life (he died at 48) he wrote over 50 books on Judaism. He prepared a new translation of the Torah complete with maps, diagrams and references to research on Israel's flora and fauna. His Handbook of Jewish Thought is an encyclopaedia of all the basis beliefs of Judaism. He wrote ground breaking books on meditation that attracted many Jews back from Eastern religions. He translated and wrote a detailed commentary on the enigmatic Sefer Yetzirah, the Kabbalistic work believed to be authored by Avraham Avinu. He wrote responses to missionary propaganda. He explained in English countless Chassidic works and Breslov teachings for Jews who could not speak Yiddish. His works have been translated into 7 languages. Imagine how much would have been lost to the Jewish world if Hanoch Rosenberg decided not to say hello to the lonely street kid in his shule.

During each day we all have countless opportunities to do small acts of kindness, whether it be a thoughtful word, a smile, a little gesture or a kind act. These small acts seem unimportant and require very little effort on our part, but they could potentially have a massive influence on another person.

In addition, every time that we put in effort to focus on the small details, we thereby demonstrate that the relationship with the other person is important to us and it help to strengthen our bond with others.

Similarly, during each day, we also have numerous opportunities to fulfil Hashem's mitzvot, including the seemingly inconsequential acts such putting on our right shoe before our left shoe and washing our hands up to the wrist according to the proper ritual. When we perform such 'little' acts not simply out of duty or by rote or habit, but rather out of love and fear of Hashem, we have elevated our actions and enhanced our relationship with Hashem.

Let's try something this week:

1. Contemplate what mitzvot we think of as 'unimportant' in our minds and re-evaluate them. Why do we think they are unimportant? Choose one or two of these mitzvot and focus on doing them just because Hashem told us to.
2. Make an effort to increase our small acts of kindness. The type of act that requires very little effort on our part and we would often think of as unimportant. Rav Avigdor Miller recommends doing one small act of kindness in secret every day simply because Hashem would be proud.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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² Adapted from "Embracing a street kid", by Sara Yocheved Rigler, as printed in "One Small Deed Can Change the World" by Nachman Seltzer, Shaar Press 2010, 252.