

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?

Matot – Making Hashem’s will your will

In this week’s Parsha of Matot we read about Hashem commanding Moshe to take vengeance against Midian for inciting Bnei Yisrael to sin. (We read about Midian’s behaviour at the end of Parshat Balak – they incited Bnei Yisrael to engage in immorality and idol worship. As a result of Midian’s evil plans, Bnei Yisrael had been struck with a plague in which 24,000 people died.) Hashem then informed Moshe that after the war against Midian Moshe will pass away.

“Hashem spoke to Moshe saying, ‘Take vengeance for Bnei Yisrael against the Midianites; afterwards you will be gathered to your people [i.e. die]” (Bamidbar 31:1-2)

Note that Hashem did not give Moshe a time limit to carry out the war against Midian. Most people who were told that they were to die after carrying out a task would be inclined to delay the task as long as possible. Perhaps they would organise their affairs, take care of any unfinished business, and perhaps take a world trip that they had not got around to yet! However, Moshe did not delay his Divinely instructed task for a moment. Straight after receiving Hashem’s command Moshe immediately began preparing for the battle. He acted with zerizut (alacrity) and fulfilled Hashem’s command with joy.¹

The Midrash² compares Moshe’s behaviour favourably with that of his disciple Yehoshua. Hashem commanded Yehoshua to battle the 31 kings in Eretz Yisrael. Yehoshua understood that he would die after these wars were over. Therefore he delayed. As a result, Hashem shortened Yehoshua’s life by 10 years. He lived until 110 years instead of 120 like Moshe.

Why did Yehoshua drag his feet? Surely his actions did not stem from a selfish place. Yehoshua understood that after his death, Bnei Yisrael would not have a strong leader and they would struggle in their service of Hashem. Yehoshua was acting altruistically, for the sake of his people. However, even though he had admirable intentions, Hashem did not want him to delay.

Jewish sources, such as the Tanach, are very open in describing the sins of Jewish leaders and other great people in our history. How can we understand this? First we must recall that Rabbi Akiva Tatz explains that when the greats committed a sin, it was only a sin at their level³. Had we been there at the time, we would not even be able to perceive that a sin was committed! However, many of these sins were caused by the slightest hint of ego which caused the person to presume that they knew better than Hashem what was the right way to behave. Here are some other examples (in addition to the case of Yehoshua which we mentioned above):

- Adam: some commentators explain Adam’s thinking as follows, if he ate from the forbidden tree it would be more difficult to serve Hashem, but if he could overcome that challenge it would result in an even greater service of Hashem.
- Nadav and Avihu thought that it was appropriate to bring an extra offering in the newly built Mishkan, even though this was not commanded by Hashem.

¹ Rashi to Bamidbar 31:3.

² Bamidbar Rabba 22:6.

³ Lecture by Rabbi Tatz: www.simpletoremember.com/media/a/sins-of-the-greats

- The sin of David Hamelech asking Hashem to test him so that he could reach the level of the Avot even though Hashem had decided not to test him.⁴
- Shlomo Hamelech marrying more women than the Torah allowed (in particular the daughters of foreign kings) because he thought that he could thereby spread knowledge of Hashem throughout the world. He believed that his wisdom would protect him from being led astray by his wives.

The Chovot Halevavot (Section 3 - “The Gate of Serving G-d”) discusses ten levels in the service of Hashem. The ninth level is very close to the top, the only flaw of people at this level is a lack of humility.⁵ The ‘sins of the great’ that we quoted above are perfect examples of this phenomenon.

It may feel demoralising to know that such great people stumbled in this area. What chance do we have?!? However, we need to remember that we are all judged at our own level. All we can do is try our best to follow Hashem’s will and to not ‘out-think’ Hashem. The Mishnah in Pirkei Avot advises us to treat Hashem’s will as if it were our will. In return, Hashem will treat our will as if it were His will. Furthermore, if we nullify our will before Hashem’s will, then Hashem will nullify the will of others before our will.⁶

We have to work on constantly thinking about what Hashem would want us to do in any given situation. But what is our will? And what is Hashem’s will? Where does our ego stop and Hashem start? It is often very difficult to know what is truly driving our actions. It takes quiet contemplation to work out why we behave the way we do. Are we acting for selfish reasons or are we truly acting for Hashem? Rabbi Dovid Nojowitz⁷ quotes the following joke:

A man was working very hard to refine his character traits. Once he woke up in the middle of the night feeling thirsty. He was about to get up and get a glass of water when it suddenly occurred to him that he would be giving in to his Taiva (his desires). He decided to hold himself back and stay in bed. But then it occurred to him that by staying in bed he was demonstrating the negative middah of laziness! He wasn’t sure what to do. Eventually he had a brilliant idea. He got out of bed, went to the kitchen, poured himself a glass of water and then poured it down the sink!

Rabbi Nojowitz quotes his mother’s wise advice: this man shouldn’t think too much. If he is thirsty, he should pour himself a glass of water, thank Hashem by saying a bracha and enjoy the drink!

Similarly, we should try to emulate Moshe and run to do Hashem’s will without thinking too much. Our job is to follow Hashem’s will. In many cases it is clear what Hashem wants us to do. He has given us mitzvot to perform and we have a detailed Shulchan Aruch which tells us how to act. We just need to do our best to make Hashem’s will our will, and to negate our ego in the process.

Let’s try something this week:

1. Try to get into the habit of asking ourselves regularly – what would Hashem want me to do in this situation? Is this what I want to do or what Hashem wants me to do?
2. Once we have identified Hashem’s will, we can try to run to do it without thinking too much about the possible repercussions.
3. If you wake up in the middle of the night feeling thirsty, get up and get a glass of water. Just remember to say a bracha!

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

⁴ See Sanhedrin 107a which discusses the sin of David and Batsheva and explains that David’s real sin was asking Hashem to test him.

⁵ See Darchai Noam Vayikra 5776 for a more in-depth discussion of this idea.

⁶ Pirkei Avot 2:4.

⁷ National Director of Torah Umesorah (US) and previous Rosh Kollel of Kollel Bet HaTalmud in Melbourne.

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Note: as the majority of our readers are located outside of Eretz Yisrael we will be following the calendar of Parshiyot for L'Aretz.

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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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