

## DARCHAI NOAM

### Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם

(Mishlei 3:17)

Va'etchanan, August 2015

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

### Va'etchanan – the power of prayer

This week's Parsha of Va'etchanan begins with Moshe describing to Bnei Yisrael how he implored Hashem to allow him to enter Eretz Yisrael. The Midrash teaches that Moshe prayed 515 times. This is hinted to in the word "Va'etchanan" which has the numerical value of 515. Even though Hashem did not grant Moshe his wish, Moshe was granted a prophetic view of the Land, and he will ultimately be allowed to enter the Land in the times of the Moshiach after the resuscitation of the dead.

Moshe's repeated requests teach us the importance of prayer. If there is anything we want, anything at all, whether it is to improve our middot, to improve our service of Hashem or even financial success, we have to ask Hashem. Of course we have to put in our hishtadlut (personal effort). However the outcome of our efforts is determined by Hashem. And we need to ask him for success.

Praying is an important part of our relationship with Hashem. It has been said that when we learn Torah, Hashem is speaking to us and when we pray, we are speaking to Hashem. Let's take a closer look at our formal prayers as instituted by the Men of the Great Assembly more than 2000 years ago.

Imagine two old friends, Reuven and Shimon. After growing up together, Shimon needs to move to a different country for work. Reuven proposes setting up a regular phone call so that they could keep in touch. They could catch up, talk about whatever issues were troubling them and reminisce about the good old days. Shimon agrees. It's a wonderful idea. However Shimon is concerned that they will run out of things to say, so he proposed another idea - they should schedule a regular call 3 times a day with a fixed script. Each time they speak they just read through an identical script. Which approach do you think is better in order to maintain a close relationship? Reuven's or Shimon's?

Though easier and less mindful, reading a predictable pre-transcribed script has obvious limitations in forging a bond between people. Actors in a play do not feel close to each other merely because they are repeatedly reciting words to each other. Yet, the main part of our prayers is the Shemoneh Esreh, the prayer in which we ask Hashem for all of our needs and thank him for what he has given us. The Shemoneh Esreh is recited 3 times a day with almost identical words. How can we relate to this?

The Gemara<sup>1</sup> brings two opinions as to the origin of the daily prayers. Rabbi Yose says that the prayers were instituted by the Avot: Avraham instituted Shacharit (Breishit 19:27); Yitzchak instituted Mincha (Breishit 24:63) and Yaakov instituted Maariv (Breishit 28:11). Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi states that the prayers were instituted to replace the daily Korbanot brought every morning (Shacharit) and afternoon (Mincha) in the Bet Hamikdash. In fact, the laws concerning the appropriate times for davening are learnt from the times of the daily Korbanot. According to Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi's view, Maariv replaces the burning up of any sacrificial parts that were left over on the alter at night. This has a lower status than the morning and afternoon Korbanot which were obligatory daily offerings. Indeed Maariv was originally a voluntary prayer, but it has subsequently become obligatory.

These two opinions as to the origin of the daily prayers represent two different aspects of prayer – the individual and the communal aspect. The Avot obviously prayed as individuals. (It was probably quite difficult to find a minyan in those days!) Conversely, the Korbanot in the Bet Hamikdash were brought by the Kohanim on behalf of the entire nation. It is interesting to note that we also have an individual

<sup>1</sup> Brachot 26b.

and a communal aspect to our prayer – the silent Shemoneh Esreh and the communal repetition by the Chazzan. Perhaps that is one reason to explain why we only daven a silent Shemoneh Esreh for Maariv and we do not have a repetition by the Chazzan. Maariv includes the individual aspect of the prayer as instituted by Yaakov but without the ‘public’ or communal aspect because there was no corresponding Korban brought in the Bet Hamikdash in the evening.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks explains the two opinions with a slightly different nuance. He explains that the Avot represent the prophets – they have an intense, personal relationship with Hashem that is relevant to that time. When they need something they turn to Hashem. In contrast, the Kohanim’s service was routine. Every day they start with the morning Korban Tamid and finish with the afternoon Tamid. Special days called for additional special Korbanot, but the ‘script’ was always the same.

Thus, we have two different approaches to the service of Hashem – the service of the prophet (the Avot) and the service of the priest (the Kohanim). Each approach has an advantage and a disadvantage as set out in the table below:

	<b>Advantages</b>	<b>Disadvantages</b>
<b>The prophet’s service</b>	Creative, flexible, can respond to the needs of the time	Lacks formality, discipline and regularity
<b>The priest’s service</b>	Regular, daily contact	Can become stale, start to do things by rote

So which is the best approach? Obviously we need both aspects. If we only served Hashem like the prophets, there is a risk that there would be no continuity. If we only served Hashem like the priests, there would be no life or creativity in our relationship with Hashem. How can we apply this to our own prayers? We need to have our regular, formal daily prayers to ensure that we have regular contact with Hashem. At the same time we need to make our prayers personal. We can do this by adding personal requests to the 16<sup>th</sup> bracha of the Shemoneh Esreh (Shema Koleinu) and by calling out to Hashem whenever we need to speak to him, even outside of our formal prayers.

What should we do if we just can’t get any kavana (concentration) during davening? Should we give up davening altogether? The Chofetz Chaim answered this question with a parable.<sup>2</sup> There was a certain village where one day all of the watches and clocks stopped and there was no watchmaker to repair them. This made life very confusing. About a year later a watchmaker was passing through the village and the village people very excitedly asked him to repair all of the watches and clocks. There was a pile of watches that could be fixed and another pile that was beyond repair. The watchmaker explained that the repairable watches had been wound regularly<sup>3</sup>. The watches that were not wound regularly became rusty and were beyond repair.

Even during the inevitable times we feel spiritually empty and don’t have kavana during davening, we still need to continue davening to prevent our insides from going rusty. But we should also be yearning and searching for a ‘watchmaker’ that can help us to regain the crucial kavana that we need!

Let’s try something this week:

1. Choose a middah that we need to work on and pray to Hashem to grant us success (at the same time as we put in the effort to improve that middah).
2. Try to make our prayers more relevant by adding in personal requests, thus boosting our kavana.
3. Focus on attending davening regularly, whether we feel like it or not.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

<sup>2</sup> Heard from Rav Zev Leff.

<sup>3</sup> To readers below the age of 30: there was a time when people had to physically wind their watches to make them work. It might sound strange but it’s true.

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## **About Darchai Noam**

The passuk 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 that usually relates 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'reiacha kamocho' – loving one's fellow as oneself.

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