

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Va'etchanan
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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Va'etchanan – loving mitzvot

In this week's Parsha of Va'etchanan, we read about Moshe designating three of the cities of refuge (the Arei Miklat). A person who committed manslaughter (i.e. he killed someone accidentally) could flee to one of the cities of refuge to escape the victim's relatives (known as the 'go'el hadam' or the blood redeemers). These blood redeemers were entitled to take revenge against the accidental killer by killing him in return¹. However, as long as the perpetrator was safely ensconced within one of the cities of refuge, the blood redeemers were not permitted to touch him. If they did kill him while he was residing in a city of refuge, they themselves would be guilty of murder. The accidental killer would thus be able to live safely within one of these cities until the current Kohen Gadol died. At that point his exile was over. He could leave the city and the victim's relatives were no longer permitted to take revenge against him.

Then Moshe set aside three cities on the side of the Jordan towards the rising sun, for a killer might flee there, he who kills his fellow man unintentionally, but did not hate him in time past, that he may flee to one of these cities, so that he might live. Bezer in the desert, in the plain country of the Reubenites, Ramoth in Gilead of the Gadites, and Golan in the Bashan of the Menassites. (Parshat Devarim, Sefer Devarim 4:41-43)

Six of these cities were to be established in total in the Land of Israel. Three of the cities were situated on the land to the east of the Jordan River (which was the land given to the tribes of Reuven, Gad and half of Menashe). These are the cities that Moshe designated in this week's Parsha. The other three cities would be designated in 'Israel proper' - the land to the west of the Jordan River. These latter three cities would only be designated by Yehoshua once Bnei Yisrael had crossed the Jordan River and entered into the Promised Land.²

However, Rashi explains that the three cities which Moshe designated would not assume the status of Cities of Refuge until the other three cities on the west side of the Jordan were also designated. This means that if an accidental killer fled to one of these cities in the meantime, they would not receive any protection. In other words, Moshe's decision to designate these cities would have no effect in his lifetime. So why did he bother? He could have left it to Yehoshua to designate all six cities.

The Gemara³ explains that Moshe's love of the mitzvot was so great that he wanted to fulfil as many mitzvot personally as he possibly could. Even in this case, when his act of designation was not even a complete fulfilment of a mitzvah, Moshe grabbed the opportunity. As the popular children's song goes "When a mitzva comes your way, you do it right away".

¹ There is a discussion in the Gemara as to whether the relatives were merely **allowed** to kill the perpetrator or whether they were **obligated** to do so (Makkot 12a).

² Chapter 20 of Sefer Yehoshua.

³ Makkot 10a, brought by Rashi in his commentary to this pasuk.

Moshe's attitude teaches us the love which we should have (and can aspire to) for mitzvot, purely because they are a means to fulfil Hashem's wishes.

The Mishnah in Pirkai Avot teaches us: "Be not as servants who serve the master for the sake of receiving reward, but rather be as servants who serve the master not for the sake of receiving reward".⁴ In his commentary to this Mishnah, Rabbainu Yonah explains that serving Hashem in anticipation of receiving reward is a deficient form of service. The Mishnah is not teaching us that it is forbidden to do mitzvot for reward. Rather, the Mishnah is teaching us that the most ideal way to serve Hashem is out of pure love for Him.⁵

The Gemara recognises that we are only human and that it is extremely difficult to act entirely without anticipation of reward. In a number of places⁶, the Gemara teaches that even if we don't currently have pure intentions, nevertheless we should still be involved in Torah and mitzvot 'shelo lishma' (i.e. without pure intentions) and eventually we will come to perform them 'lishma' (i.e. with pure intentions).⁷ Rav Chaim of Volozhin⁸ writes that there will always be an element of 'shelo lishma' in our observance of the mitzvot. However, as we grow spiritually, hopefully the 'lishma' element will grow as well.

One of the 'shelo lishma' aspects of our mitzva observance might be the public recognition and honour that we receive when people see us performing a good deed. In his 'Ten Steps to Greatness', Rav Avigdor Miller listed 10 daily acts that we can practice regularly to help us achieve spiritual greatness.⁹ One of these steps is to do one act of kindness each day that no-one - other than Hashem - knows about. Performing such a hidden act of chesed can help us to increase our level of 'lishma'. Since the act is in secret, there is no recognition and no public accolades when we perform such private good deeds. All we have is the internal satisfaction that we are serving Hashem and making Him proud.

The door to the shule needed oiling. Every time the door opened the squeak was very irritating and interrupted the people who were davening, especially when people arrived late to shule.¹⁰ No-one was specifically responsible for fixing the door, so no one did anything about it. One morning, David came to shule early armed with a can of WD-40. He quickly sprayed the hinges and then hid the can in his bag. Everyone was so pleased at the peace and quiet. David didn't tell anyone he had fixed the door. Hashem knew. That was enough.

Surely if we look out for them, we can all find many opportunities to do hidden acts of kindness.

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to focus on doing mitzvot lishma (at least partially) – just because Hashem commanded you to do them.
2. Look out for hidden acts of kindness and seize the chance to do a mitzva just for the love of fulfilling Hashem's will.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

⁴ Pirkai Avot 1:3, in the name of Antigonus, leader of Socho.

⁵ See also Tosafot Yom Tov, commentary on this Mishnah.

⁶ For example, Pesachim 50b.

⁷ There are a number of opinions as to what 'shelo lishma' actually means. Tosefot (Ta'anit 7a) provides two meanings – doing something for personal benefit such as to receive honour or learning Torah in order to ridicule the Torah (G-d forbid).

⁸ Nefesh HaChaim, Chapter 3. Rav Chaim of Volozhin was the main student of the Vilna Gaon.

⁹ Try Googling "Rav Avigdor miller 10 steps to greatness"

¹⁰ Yes, it might sound surprising, but there are some shules where people turn up late to davening!

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About Darchai Noam

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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, usually 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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