

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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

Va'etchanan – The mitzva of teshuva

In this week's Parsha of Va'etchanan, Moshe continues his farewell speech to Bnei Yisrael before his death. This Parsha contains a number of fundamental passages, including the Ten Commandments and the Shema. Let's focus on one aspect of Moshe's speech:

“Hashem will scatter you among the people, and you will be left few in number among the nations where Hashem will lead you...From there you will seek Hashem your G-d and you will find Him, if you search for Him with all your heart and all your soul.” (Devarim 4:27, 29)

Moshe is prophesying the future exile and the eventual return of the Jewish people. Moshe is comforting the people by telling them that even though they will be punished, they will ultimately do teshuva and find their way back: “you will seek Hashem ... and you will find Him”. The answer to their troubles is repentance, doing teshuva.

The Rambam¹ summarises the law of teshuva in 4 easy to remember steps. A good memory aid is the following four words: Confess, Past, Present and Future:

Step 1: Confess – admit the sin out loud.

Step 2: Past – regret the fact that you did the sin.

Step 3: Present – stop doing the sin now! This one sounds obvious, but it needs to be stated. If one tries to do teshuva while they are still committing the sin, it is compared to someone who immerses in a mikveh in order to become purified while holding an impure sheretz² in their hand.

Step 4: Future – resolve to not continue doing the sin in the future. It is best to put in place some practical steps to help keep this resolution. For instance, if you are tempted to eat non-kosher food at a particular restaurant then make sure you don't walk past it.

The concept of teshuva is so fundamental that it is one of the seven things that Hashem created before He created the world.³ The lesson is that the world can't succeed and reach its potential without the concept of teshuva already being in place.

Some people have the attitude that once they have broken a halacha they give up hope. For example, someone breaks one of the laws of Shabbat soon after candle-lighting. They then throw in the towel and say to themselves: “That's it, there's no point continuing. I've already broken Shabbat so I might as well not bother keeping the rest of Shabbat.” That is the Yetzer Hara talking! It is important to keep in mind that a massive portion of the halachot in the Shulchan Aruch are aimed at people who have made a mistake and need to know what to do. For example, someone accidentally cooked milk in a meat pot, what do they need to do now? Can they eat the food? Do they need to kasher the pot? If so, how? The halacha was designed for human beings that are not infallible. We all make mistakes and there is nothing wrong with that... provided that we admit our mistakes and make a genuine effort to do teshuva.

¹ Hilchot Teshuva Chapter 2.

² A sheretz is one of eight creatures listed in the Torah whose dead body imparts a high level of impurity (Vayikra 11:29-30).

³ The other six items were: Torah, Gan Eden, Gehinnom, the Throne of Glory, the Bet Hamikdash, and the name of the Moshiach (Gemara Nedarim 39b).

There are a number of halachot relating to the “techum”. The techum is the maximum distance that one is allowed to travel outside of their dwelling place or town on Shabbat and Yom Tov?⁴. The Shulchan Aruch teaches what to do after the fact if one breaks the law and walks too far on Shabbat or Yom Tov:

- There are certain leniencies that apply in pressing circumstances e.g. if one needed to leave the techum in order to save a life.
- If one left the techum inadvertently, then they can take advantage of a leniency which allows them to return back to the city. If they need to use the bathroom, they are allowed to go back inside the techum in order to find a bathroom. Once they are back inside the techum it is as though they never left and they are free to move around within the techum.⁵
- If someone left the techum intentionally they are restricted to within 4 amot (about 2 metres) for the remainder of the Shabbat. That is, they are not allowed to move beyond this small space until the end of Shabbat.

The questions can be asked, if someone deliberately left the techum in circumstances when they were not permitted to do so, they apparently don't care about keeping the halacha! So why would the Rabbis bother telling them that they are restricted to walking only 4 amot for the remainder of Shabbat? Wouldn't they ignore that halacha as well? Some commentators have suggested that there is always a chance that this person may all of a sudden do teshuva and then follow the halacha. This shows us that we can all decide to do teshuva in the blink of an eye!

A similar case is brought in the Gemara⁶ in relation to a man who decided to conditionally betroth a woman.⁷ If the condition is satisfied, they would be married, and if the condition is not satisfied, they would not be married. This has very important halachic consequences – if it turns out that they are married, then she becomes forbidden to another man until she receives a get (halachik divorce). She also becomes forbidden to marry a Kohen for ever. For example, if he says the regular formula for marriage but adds “on condition that I am a tzaddik”, then even if he is known to be totally evil, the woman is considered married and she requires a get. How can that be? Even though we know this person to be wicked, perhaps thoughts of teshuva entered his mind. We take his statement as evidence that he is on the road to teshuva. And that is sufficient for him to potentially meet the condition of being a tzaddik (and thus be considered married)!

What an amazing concept! No matter how far we have fallen, we can always make the decision to do teshuva and change for the better. The power is in our hands. This is an especially comforting thought for Shabbat Nachamu – this Shabbat of comfort.

Let's try something this week:

1. Remember that despite Bnei Yisrael straying, we have a guarantee from Moshe that when we seek out Hashem, we will find Him.
2. Remember the four steps of teshuva and try to put them in place for at least one transgression.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁴ This law is rarely applicable for people living in large cities. However, it can become very relevant when going away for the weekend. A simple stroll in the countryside can be problematic. One should consult their Rabbi about the parameters of this prohibition.

⁵ The reason for this leniency is that the laws of techum are Rabbinic and in certain cases the Rabbis allow one to contravene Rabbinic laws for matters relating to human dignity. [Note: this is not a blanket permission and Rabbinic guidance is required.] In truth, there is an opinion that the laws of techum are actually a Torah prohibition, but the Torah prohibition only applies from 12 mil beyond the border of the city (approximately 12 kilometres or about 7.5 miles). The prohibition actually commences on a Rabbinic level from 2,000 amot (approximately 1 km or 0.7 miles).

⁶ Kiddushin 49b.

⁷ Don't try this at home!