

DARCHAI NOAM**Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם**

(Mishlei 3:17)

Ki Tavo, September 2015

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Ki Tavo – making a good start

This week's Parsha, Ki Tavo, begins with the mitzva of the first fruits. Once a year, Bnei Yisrael were required to bring an offering of the first of their crops to the Kohanim in the Bet Hamikdash. As the crops began to ripen, they would tie a ribbon around the first fruits so that they could be identified. Around the time of Shavuot they would bring the first fruits to Jerusalem in a huge parade. They would hand over the basket of first fruits and recite certain pasukim about Yetziat Mitzrayim and thanking Hashem for the Land.

There are many other examples in the Torah where "firsts" or "beginnings" are treated as more sanctified. For example:

- the pidyon haben ceremony which is only performed on a first born son;
- the firstborn of our flocks is given as a gift to the Kohanim;
- we are forbidden from eating our crops until we first separate terumah (gifts to the Kohanim) and tithes.

Most of these 'firsts' must be consumed in a particular way which accords with their sanctified status. For example, they may only be consumed:

- by the Kohanim;
- in the holiest place - some of the gifts to the Kohanim must be consumed in the Bet Hamikdash, the second tithe (masef shaini) must be consumed in Jerusalem;
- in a state of purity – e.g. the terumah must be pure and the Kohen that consumes the terumah must also be in a state of purity.

Rav Zev Leff explains that these various 'firsts' (the first of our crops, the first born of our flocks, the first shearing of our sheep etc.) are elevated and held up as an example. However the rest of the crops do not retain such an elevated status. So too, we are only human. Though we may initiate our actions with the best of intentions we usually cannot remain at such an elevated level constantly. However, if we start off in the right way, we are at least reminded which way we should be facing and towards what we should be aspiring.

As we approach Rosh Hashanah, this message is appropriate and timely. We spend this time on a higher level. We may not be able to stick to that level for the remainder of the year. However, at least we have set the tone and the direction towards what we hope to achieve during the year ahead.

As we discussed in last week's Darchai Noam, Rosh Hashanah is a good time to accept upon ourselves a kabbala (something extra that we wish to commit to). We should choose an area of our lives that needs improvement and specify a small, manageable change. Then we should implement strategies to ensure that we are more likely to stick to it consistently.

Often we take on "New Years Resolutions" but then become disheartened when they don't stick. Rabbi Resiner tells the story of someone who used to get very inspired by the Daf Yomi siyum which is celebrated approximately every seven years. (Many groups around the world follow the cycle of learning one page of the Gemara every single day. An enormous celebration takes place when the

cycle is completed and the groups complete learning through the entire Gemara.) This particular person was inspired by the celebration and decided to join the program. However, the inspiration did not last and he only managed to complete the first masechet of the Gemara (masechet Brachot) before dropping out. Seven years later he became inspired once again and he joined the program for a second time. However, it proved too difficult and he dropped out again after only managing to complete masechet Brachot for a second time. Seven years later, when another siyum was held, he announced that he will not be joining the program again because he already tried twice and failed. He felt that there was no point trying again. Rabbi Resiner commented that instead of lamenting his failure he could celebrate the fact that he was learning through masechet Brachot once every seven years! That's certainly significant.¹

Rabbi Reisner himself tries to take on something new every Rosh Hashanah. He admitted that he doesn't always succeed in sticking to it as well as he hoped. One year, he tried to take on having more kavana at a certain point in davening. He managed to remember about 30% of the time. After he told this story a member of his congregation told Rabbi Reisner that he also took on something for Rosh Hashanah and he felt that he was failing dismally. But when he heard that Rabbi Reisner was only at 30%, he was encouraged because he realised that he was doing better than the Rabbi!

Imagine the following scenario. You are at school and there is a big exam coming up. The teacher has agreed to give the class the whole afternoon in the library for personal study for the exam. After an hour the teacher sees that everyone is working well and she leaves. The students take advantage of the situation. They put down their school books and start to mess around. Was the first hour of study worthwhile? If the students couldn't keep it up after the teacher left, should they have bothered learning for the first hour? The answer is obvious. What they gained during that first hour is real and valuable. It might even make the difference between passing and failing. Similarly, if we take on something and we cannot maintain it for as long as we hoped, the short time that we did spend working on that area is precious and meaningful. Even that feeling of disappointment that we have when we realise that we didn't fully complete our goals yet is precious – it shows Hashem that at least we have the desire to improve and it gives us the impetus to try again.

Of course it is better to take on something new and stick to it. Over time it may become a habit and be integrated into our personalities. But even if we don't succeed we should still keep on trying each year. Remember, it is our Yetzer Hara that is trying to convince us not to continue trying if we fail.

On a personal note, I have decided to try and put into practice something that I learned recently in the Blake Street Gemara shiur. I am trying to pause for a few moments before I start Shemoneh Esreh in order to clear my mind and focus my attention. So far I am tracking at around 10% success rate. A paper clip or a sticky note in my siddur might help to remind me. Hopefully, if I keep on trying it will eventually become a habit. But even if it doesn't, I know that I will obtain reward for the small amount that I did manage to achieve.

Let's try something this week:

1. With just over one week left until Rosh Hashanah, it is still not too late to take on a new goal of self-improvement. Pick an area that needs improvement, in our service of Hashem and/or in the mitzvot that relate to our fellow man.
2. Let's learn a lesson from the first fruits. Even if we have tried to improve many times in the past without long term success, let's not give up hope. Just keep on trying and celebrate any and every achievement we make.

The next edition will B"H be for Parshat Noach. Shabbat Shalom and Shana Tova, Rabbi Ledder.

¹ Members of the Blake Street Gemara shiur will find this story amusing. We are about half way through masechet Brachot and at the rate we are going it will probably take us around 7 years to complete just masechet Brachot! [The shiur is held over Skype on Wednesday nights (Australian time). If anyone is interested in joining the shiur please send an email to: darchai.noam@gmail.com.]

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Abot 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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