

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Ki Tavo, September 2016

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Ki Tavo – the king of Cheshbon and the king of Bashan

At the end of this week's Parsha, Moshe gives Bnei Yisrael a very brief history lesson, from Yetziyat Mitzrayim to the battle against Sichon and Og. One of the last things that Bnei Yisrael did before entering the land of Israel was defeat these two kings in battle:

*“Then you arrived at this place, and Sichon king of **Cheshbon** and Og king of **Bashan** went out towards us in battle **and we smote them**. We took their land and gave it as an inheritance to Reuven, to Gad and to half the tribe of Menashe. **You shall observe the words of this covenant** and you shall perform them in order that **you will succeed in all that you do**.”*
(Devarim 29: 6-8)

Someone once approached Rav Kook with a question¹. He was deciding whether to make Aliya and he was concerned about being able to make a living in Israel. He presented Rav Kook with a detailed analysis of the financial arguments. Rav Kook responded by quoting the incident referred to in the above pasukim. Before entering the land of Israel, Bnei Yisrael smote the king of “Cheshbon”. The word “Cheshbon” means calculations. Rav Kook told the man that before entering Eretz Yisrael is not the time to make calculations. It is the time to act without logic and to trust in Hashem. If Hashem said that it is the right thing to do then there is nothing to fear.

We can apply this principle to all mitzvot. If Hashem has commanded us to do something, then we don't need to undertake cheshbonot / calculations to determine whether it is appropriate. We just need a simple, straightforward faith in Hashem, His guidance and His path.

Rabbi Lawrence Keleman² notes this phenomenon of faith superseding logic in relation to the righteous gentiles during the Holocaust. The non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jewish people were often those that were simple and uneducated. The more intellectual or sophisticated people were often those that looked the other way while the Jews were being murdered. They relied on their intellect and they were able to rationalise out of doing the right thing. The more simple people just knew that something was wrong and they were prepared to act, with courage and faith, not intellect.

This teaches us that when we are presented with an opportunity to do Hashem's will, instead of overthinking the situation, we just need to observe Hashem's covenant. Then, as the pasuk guarantees, we will succeed in all that we do.

Note that the second king that was killed by Bnei Yisrael before entering the land was the king of Bashan. “Bashan” is very similar to the Hebrew word “Bayshan” meaning bashful or shy. Perhaps this suggests that in order to “jump in” and perform Hashem's will, we must avoid being bashful and instead seize the moment proactively and with courage.

¹ Seen in *Angel Among Men: Impressions from the Life of Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook Zt"l*, by Simcha Raz, Urim Publications 2003.

² Heard in a lecture given in Melbourne.

Interestingly, the Gemara³ considers the character trait of bashfulness to be a positive trait. The Gemara teaches us that Bnei Yisrael is distinguished by three characteristics – they are merciful, bashful and benevolent. Only someone with these characteristics is fit to join this nation.

However, all middot have a time and place when they are appropriate.⁴ For example, the traits of pride and anger should generally be avoided, but even they are appropriate in small measure in some circumstances. Chovot Halevavot⁵ lists a number of character traits and instructs when they are appropriate to be used⁶.

Bashfulness is generally considered to be an appropriate character trait because it is linked to humility. However there are times when we have to “smite the king of Bashan”, for example when we need to take a bold and daring step for Hashem. In other words, in order to take a leap of faith we often need to conquer our intellectual/rational side (represented by Cheshbon) and our fear and lack of courage (represented by Bashan). Only then will we succeed.

Rabbi Akiva Tatz points out a fascinating insight revealed in the Nishmat Kol Chai prayer⁷. The prayer sets out at length that it is absolutely impossible for us to give adequate praise to Hashem. Even if “our mouths were as full of song as the sea”, “our lips as full of praise as the breadth of the sea”, “our hands as outspread as eagles of the sky and our feet as swift as deer” we could still not thank Hashem sufficiently. However, then the prayer says: “**Therefore**, the organs that You placed within us, and the spirit and soul that You breathed into our nostrils, and the tongue that you placed into our mouth – all of them shall thank and bless, praise and glorify...”. The word ‘therefore’ seems out of place. It would make more sense to say: “**Despite** the fact that this is impossible we are going to try anyway”. We have just stated that something is impossible to do, and then we say, **therefore** we are going to do it!

Rabbi Tatz teaches that this prayer reveals powerful lessons about hishtadlut and emuna. Hashem is in charge of the outcome and we just have to put in the effort, even if we feel that achieving the desired outcome is impossible. We don’t need to concern ourselves with whether something is achievable or realistic because we believe with perfect faith that Hashem will make it happen if it is His will. Our job is simply to decide what is right, and then just do it. That is the Jewish way.

We can apply this formula for success to our own growth in Elul. When we create an Elul plan with New Year resolutions, we may find that taking on something new, and taking that first step into uncharted territory can be frightening. It is times like this that we need to smite the king of Cheshbon and the king of Bashan and just jump right in. If Hashem wants us to do it then we must realise that it is the best and only thing to be done!

Let’s try something this week:

1. Seize this amazing time of growth in the month of Elul to undertake something new. Let’s conquer our fear and our intellect and bite the bullet and just do it.
2. To keep it realistic it may help to take it on temporarily, just until Yom Kippur (Between you and me, we’ll probably find that it is easier than we thought and we will end up taking it on permanently. But don’t let the Yetzer Hara find out!)

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

³ Yevamot 79a.

⁴ See Darchai Noam, Parshat Terumah 5774 (Feb 2014) where this idea was discussed in greater depth.

⁵ By R' Bachya ben Yoseph ibn Paquda

⁶ For example, pride is appropriate when meeting those who deny G-d, so that we clearly indicate our opposition to their views. Anger is appropriate when falsehood prevails over truth. See Chovot Halevavot, Gate 3, Chapter 10 (page 341 of the Feldheim edition).

⁷ Recited at the end of Pesukai Dezimrah on Shabbat and Yom Tov mornings and also on the Seder night. See page 400 of the standard Artscroll Ashkenaz siddur.

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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 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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