

## DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

### “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Ki Tetze  
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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

### Ki Tavo – approaching Rosh Hashanah

This week’s Parsha, Ki Tavo, begins with the mitzva of the first fruits. The first fruits to ripen were treated in a special way. At the time that the Bet Hamikdash was standing, Bnei Yisrael were required to bring an offering of the first of their crops to the Kohanim. As the crops began to ripen, they would tie a ribbon around the first fruits to identify them. Every year, around Shavuot time, they would bring these first fruits to Jerusalem in a huge parade. They would hand over the baskets of first fruits to the Kohanim and recite certain pasukim about Yetziat Mitzrayim and thanking Hashem for the Land of Israel.

“Firsts” or “beginnings” are also treated as more sanctified in other instances in the Torah. For example:

- the pidyon haben ceremony which is only performed on a first-born son;
- the firstborn of certain animals was 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 (ma’aser 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.

We can compare this to our middot and behaviour. We may initiate our actions with the best of intentions but we usually cannot remain at such an elevated level constantly. However, it is still beneficial to ‘start out right’. 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.

This message is appropriate and timely for us as we approach Rosh Hashanah. We may spend this time of year on a higher spiritual level than usual. However, we are only human and we may not be able to stick to that level for the remainder of the year. Nevertheless, at least we have set the tone and the direction for the year ahead.

Rosh Hashanah is a good time to accept upon ourselves a kabbala (something extra that we wish to commit to). We can choose an area of our lives that needs improvement and specify a small, manageable change. Then we can implement strategies to increase our chances of sticking to it consistently.

Often, we take on “New Years’ Resolutions”, but then become disheartened when they do not stick. Rabbi Yisrael Resiner tells the story of someone who became 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 or siyum takes place when the cycle is

completed and the groups complete learning through the entire Gemara.) This person was inspired by the celebration and decided to join the program. However, his inspiration did not last and he only managed to complete the first masechet of the Gemara (masechet Brachot) before dropping out of the program. Seven years later he again became inspired 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. When another siyum was held seven years later, he announced that he would not be joining the program again because he had already tried twice and failed. He felt that there was no point in trying again. Rabbi Resiner commented that instead of lamenting his failure, this person could have celebrated the fact that he completed learning through masechet Brachot once every seven years! That's certainly significant.<sup>1</sup>

Rabbi Reisner admits himself that he tries to take on a new kabala during Rosh Hashanah, though he doesn't always succeed in sticking to it as well as he hoped. One year, took on a kabala to have more kavana at a certain point in his davening. He managed to achieve this about 30% of the time. After he shared his experience with his congregation, a congregant confided in him that his story gave him chizuk. The congregant had also taken on something new for Rosh Hashanah but felt despairing at his progress. However, he had gained encouragement when he heard that Rabbi Reisner was only at 30%, because he realised that he was tracking better than the Rabbi!

Imagine the following scenario. You are back at school and there is a big exam coming up. The teacher 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 them passing and failing. Similarly, if we take on an extra mitzvah but we cannot maintain it for as long as we hoped, the short time that we did spend working on that area is still 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 to Hashem, demonstrating to Him that at least we have the desire to improve. Our disappointment also has the potential to give 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. However, the fact there is the possibility of us not maintaining our new level consistently should not preclude us from trying each year. Remember, it is our Yetzer Hara that is trying to convince us not to continue trying if we fail.

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. Our first efforts are very precious and have an elevated status. 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 of Darchai Noam will B"H be for Parshat Noach.

Shabbat Shalom and Shana Tova to all,

Rabbi Ledder

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<sup>1</sup> Members of the Blake Street Gemara shiur will find this story amusing. We are about three quarters of the way through masechet Brachot and at the rate we are going it will probably take us well over 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](mailto:darchai.noam@gmail.com).]

## **About Darchai Noam**

Darchai Noam is available online at [www.darchai-noam.com](http://www.darchai-noam.com). You can access this week's edition of Darchai Noam, archived back issues of Darchai Noam and other divrei Torah.

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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