

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Ki Tavo (Devarim 26:1-29:8)
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Ki Tavo – The importance of gratitude

This week's Parsha, Ki Tavo, sets out the mitzva of the first fruits (“Bikkurim”). Once a year, Bnei Yisrael were required to bring an offering of the first of their crops to the Kohanim in the Bet Hamikdash. After the Kohan took the offering, the donor was required to recite the following passage out loud:

“An Aramean [Lavan] tried to destroy my forefather [Yaakov]¹ and he went down to Mitzrayim and he lived there with a small number of people and there he became a large, powerful and numerous nation. And the Egyptians treated us cruelly and they oppressed us and they made us do hard labour. And we called out to Hashem the G-d of our fathers and Hashem heard our voice and he saw our suffering and our hard work and our oppression. And Hashem brought us from Mitzrayim with a strong hand and an outstretched arm and with great awe and with signs and wonders. And he brought us to this place and he gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And now I bring the first fruits of the land that Hashem gave me.” (Devarim 26:5-10)

After reciting this passage, the donor was required to bow down before Hashem. Then he was commanded to rejoice with all the good that Hashem gave him.

In these six sentences, this passage has encapsulated the entire Jewish history until that point in time! It is a very important passage - it also forms the centrepiece of the Haggadah that we recite at the Pesach Seder, the one night of the year when we focus on passing on our tradition to the next generation.²

The very first pasuk in the Torah states: *“Breishit Bara Elokim et Hashamayim V'et Ha'aretz”*. This is usually translated as “In the beginning G-d created the heavens and the earth”. However, Rashi points out an alternative reading of the first word of this pasuk. Rashi explains that the word “Breishit” can be read as “B” and “Reishit”. “B” stands for “Bishvil” which means “for the purpose of”. Reading this way, the first pasuk would be translated as: “G-d created the heavens and the earth for the purpose of ‘Reishit’”. But what does “Reishit” mean? The word “Reishit” technically means “first”. A number of things are referred to as “Reishit” in the Tanach. Rashi gives two examples - the Torah and Bnei Yisrael. The implication is that the entire world was created for the sake of the Torah and/or for the sake of Bnei Yisrael.

The Midrash³ brings some other explanations for what “Reishit” could mean. For instance, the Midrash mentions the passage from this week's Parsha that we discussed above. The “first fruits” that Bnei Yisrael are commanded to bring to the Bet Hamikdash are also referred to as “Reishit”.⁴ Interpreting the word “Reishit” in this way suggests that the whole world was created in the merit of performing this mitzvah of the first fruits! That certainly elevates this mitzvah to a whole new level.

What is so unique about this mitzvah? The gift of the first fruits is just one of 24 gifts that Bnei Yisrael was commanded to give to the Kohanim. The answer may lie in the declaration that is recited when the fruits are given. At the time when Bnei Yisrael are enjoying their first fruits of the year, they stop to acknowledge Hashem's role and they say thank you. Thank you for the redemption from Mitzrayim. Thank you for the land. Thank you for the successful crops. The mitzvah of the first fruits centres on acknowledging Hashem

¹ Some commentators translate this pasuk as “My father was a wandering Aramean”.

² This passage is recited and analysed in the Maggid section of the Haggadah.

³ Midrash Breishit Rabbah 1:4.

⁴ Devarim 26:2.

and showing gratitude. And that gratitude may be a sufficient reason for the whole world to have been created.

As we pointed out above, after the declaration is made, the donor is commanded to rejoice with all the good that Hashem has given him. It is specifically then, after focusing on everything that there was to be thankful for, after acknowledging the role of Hashem and saying thank you, that Bnei Yisrael were commanded to rejoice.

This order of events demonstrates that gratitude is a precondition to happiness. This is a very simple, but powerful idea. In fact, it may be a key secret of happiness. We all know it to be true, but we need a reminder every now and then. If we want to serve Hashem with joy⁵ then we need to count our blessings, be grateful and say thank you.

This teaching may help to explain a phrase in Modim d'Rabbanan (the bracha of thanksgiving that the kehillah recites when the chazan repeats the Amidah). After thanking Hashem for giving us life and sustaining us, we end with the following: "We thank you for inspiring us to thank you"⁶. It is a gift to be truly able to focus in our hearts on all the good in our lives. The mere act of saying thank you is good for us. So we thank Hashem for enabling us to reach a point of being genuinely able to thank him!

We often need to complete medical questionnaires for ourselves or our children (e.g. for an insurance policy or when completing a form for our child's school etc.). This can be a long and painful process.⁷ However, it is usually the case that most of the medical conditions on the list are not relevant. Each time we answer in the negative, we should pause and try to imagine how things would be if we (or our child) did have that condition (G-d forbid). And then, each time the answer to the question is negative, we should turn to Hashem and say a genuine and heart-felt thank you. The simple, annoying process of filling out the form can then become an important exercise in gratitude.

Perhaps we can apply this principle to our interpersonal relationships. One way to enjoy satisfying relationships is to choose to focus on what we have and appreciate it. Many of us are hard wired to find faults in others – whether it be for an ego boost or a genuine desire to fix things or fix other people. Thus, we may find it difficult to switch from a fault-finding mode of thinking to a gratitude mode. However, ultimately, we will achieve greater lasting contentment by acknowledging and appreciating the good in others and in our relationship with them.

Genuine gratitude emanates from the sefira of "hod" (submission). Sometimes it is difficult to say thank you because we are in effect acknowledging that we needed the help of another person or that we submitted to them. That may be difficult for our fragile egos to handle. But if we remember that saying thank you and being grateful is one of the secrets to happiness, this might help us to overcome our ego's resistance.

Let's try something this week:

1. Make an effort to say thank you for specific things that others do for you. As you say thank you, contemplate how fortunate you are to have this person in your life at that moment.
2. Count your blessings. Take a paper and pen and jot down 20 things for which to be personally grateful. This is a useful thing to do on a regular basis because it refocuses our mind to gratitude mode and shifts our way of seeing the world. The more specific we are in our list, the more meaningful and effective this process becomes. As we write down each item, we can say thank you to Hashem, the source of all blessing.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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⁵ Tehillim 100:2.

⁶ Translation in the Artscroll siddur (see for example p112 of the standard Ashkenaz siddur).

⁷ Especially when the form is in Hebrew!