

DARCHAI NOAM

Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם

(Mishlei 3:17)

Ki Teitzei, August 2015

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Ki Teitzei – the hare and the tortoise

Most of us know Aesop's famous fable of the tortoise and the hare. The tortoise challenged the hare to a race. The hare took off at a blinding pace. The tortoise just kept plodding on, one slow step after another. The hare was so confident he would win, that he decided to take a nap. When he finally woke up, he discovered that the tortoise was too far in front for him to catch up. The tortoise won.

There is a source for this truth in our own writings, as it says: "The race does not belong to the swift" (Kohelet 9:11).

In this week's Parsha of Ki Teitzei, Moshe teaches Bnei Yisrael about a large number of mitzvot. This is chazara (revision) for Bnei Yisrael. Though they have already learnt about these mitzvot, Moshe seizes this final chance before he dies to make sure that Bnei Yisrael know the details of each of the mitzvot. One mitzvah that is covered in this parsha is the mitzvah of tzitzit:

You shall make for yourself twisted threads on the four corners of your garment with which you cover yourself. (Devarim 22:12)

According to Torah law, it is forbidden for a Jewish male to wear a four cornered garment unless that garment has halachically acceptable tzitzit on each of the four corners. There is no Torah obligation to wear such a four-cornered garment. These days it is unusual for men to wear such garments as part of their normal clothing. However the Rabbis have obligated men to wear such four-cornered garments to obtain the benefit of the mitzvah. Therefore, the positive obligation to wear tzitzit is in effect a Rabbinic law.

When a man comes to shule in the morning for Shacharit he needs to put on his tallit and his tefillin. Which mitzvah takes precedence? One might think that the tefillin should take priority because they are a Torah level mitzvah while the tallit is only a Rabbinic requirement. However, that is not the case. There is a major principle in halacha as follows: "Tadir v'she'eino tadir, tadir kodem" – if we are faced with two mitzvot, the mitzvah that is performed more frequently takes precedence.¹ We wear our tallit every single day of the week. We only wear tefillin on regular weekdays - we don't wear tefillin on Shabbat and Yom Tov and some don't wear tefillin on Chol Hamoed. Therefore the tallit is worn more regularly and it takes priority. Thus we don our tallit first and only then put on our tefillin.

Why do we give priority to the mitzvot that are tadir (more frequent)? Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan teaches us an amazing insight that we can learn from this principle of 'tadir'.² There are two ways that we can grow in our service of Hashem – we can grow in leaps and bounds or we can grow in a slow and steady manner. Which way is better? We might presume that it is better to grow quickly. Doesn't it make sense to reach our destination as quickly as possible? However, the risk with this approach is that if we improve too quickly we might take on more than we can really handle and end up achieving nothing.

As we have noted earlier, there is a phrase that appears in the Gemara – "Tefasta Meruba lo tefasta, tefasta ketuna tefasta". Loosely translated, this means that if you try to grab too much you will end up with nothing. If you try to take a more modest amount you will at least end up with something. If we

¹ This principle is mentioned a number of times in the Gemara, for example, Brachot 27a.

² "Tzitzit – A Thread of Light", by Aryeh Kaplan, NCSY 1993.

are inauthentic and try to do things that we are not ready for, we might become disheartened and we might even slip back further than we were before our leap forwards!

The most effective and lasting way to reach our destination is to do something regularly and consistently, like the tortoise. In order to achieve this in practice, it is more authentic to take on a goal that is small and achievable.

Why do we often fall into the trap of taking on more than we can handle? Why do we find it so difficult to take on small improvements and stick with them consistently?

Perhaps, one reason is because the slow and steady approach is boring. It's much more exciting to aim for and achieve a big change. The adrenalin rush and the satisfaction of achievement spur us on. People often prefer the exciting approach over the boring approach because boring is, well, boring.

Another reason may be a trick that our Yetzer Hara plays on us. The Yetzer Hara understands very well the danger of taking on too much and thus deliberately convinces us that we are better than we are really are. It tells us things like: "Why are you just planning to learn an extra 5 minutes a day, you can learn the entire Gemara this year!" or "Why are you just planning to count to 10 before responding in anger, you should be able to wipe out all traces of anger!" Most people enjoy being flattered and they fall for this trick. If we are aware of the trick we can avoid falling into the trap of taking on too much and then failing. If we do fail, there is an additional risk - we may not bother to try again next time because we convince ourselves that our attempts to improve are futile.

As we have noted earlier, consistency was Yehoshua's secret to success and the reason that he was appointed as leader after Moshe. He was constantly in Moshe's tent to learn Torah. He was consistently the first person there each morning to set up the tables and the last to leave at night after tidying up. It is that trait of consistency and reliability that made Yehoshua the perfect choice as leader of Bnei Yisrael. Yehoshua's consistency is compared to Pinchas' big, dramatic act of killing Cozbi and Zimri to save Bnei Yisrael and protect Hashem's honour. When it comes to choosing the leader of Bnei Yisrael consistency wins the day over Pinchas' bravery.³

Admittedly, there are sometimes unique moments in life when a dramatic change is called for and is appropriate. However, these moments are less common. Usually, the most effective way to achieve sustained improvement in the service of Hashem is to act like the tortoise. This is one of the lessons that we can learn from the tzitzit.

This message is very relevant for the month of Elul. We are now only a few weeks away from Rosh Hashanah and the aseret yemei teshuva. There is a very prevalent custom to take on something new at this auspicious time of the year. Instead of reaching for a goal that is too big for us to maintain, we can instead choose something small and manageable and then stick with it, plodding along, one small, slow step after the other. We can seek out the 'low-lying fruit', the easy improvements that are within our grasp. When we stand before Hashem in judgement, we won't be judged for failing to accomplish things that are totally out of our reach. However we will be judged for our successful achievements, no matter how small. Once we have maintained our new goal for long enough it will become ingrained as a new habit. Then we can pick a new manageable goal and achieve it too!

Let's try something this week:

1. With only just over 2 weeks left until Rosh Hashanah, NOW is the time to take on a new goal of self-improvement. Pick an area where we need to improve, in our service of Hashem or in the mitzvot that relate to our fellow man.
2. Let's learn a lesson from the tzitzit and the tortoise, let's aim a bit lower and try our best to maintain consistency, regularity and reliability in order to achieve success.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

³ See Darchai Noam, Parshat Pinchas 5775 for further discussion of this topic.

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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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