

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Nitzavim, September 2016

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Nitzavim – Preparing for Rosh Hashanah

At the end of this week's Parsha, Nitzavim, Moshe presents Bnei Yisrael with a choice from Hashem and the consequences for that choice:

“Behold, I have placed before you today life and good, and death and evil, that which I command you today, to love Hashem your G-d, to walk in his ways, to observe his commandments, his decrees and his laws, so that you will live and increase, and Hashem your G-d will bless you in the land to which you are coming to take possession of it.”
(Devarim 30:15-16)

The choice seems so straightforward. Who wouldn't choose life and good over death and evil! The pasuk almost makes it a no-brainer. To obtain “life and good”, all we need to do is love Hashem, walk in his ways and follow his commandments.

However, as we all know, change is never easy. And some of the mitzvot can be quite challenging to keep. If we take on too much at once, it could be inauthentic and unlikely to last. This may lead to frustration or depression. The key is to make small and regular changes and to work consistently at keeping them.

We are entering a time of judgement and it is an opportune time to take on extra good deeds. We want to have as many mitzvot to our credit as possible so that we can receive the most favourable judgement. It is as if we are declaring to Hashem: “Before you judge me, please take into account these extra mitzvot that I am now observing”. The Shulchan Aruch advises us to be extra stringent during the Aseret Yemei Teshuva between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. For example, someone who is not usually strict regarding Pat Akum (i.e. they eat bread cooked by a non-Jew) should only eat Pat Yisrael (bread cooked by a Jew) during this auspicious time.¹

However doesn't it seem that simply adopting an extra practice temporarily and being on our best behaviour is devious or hypocritical? Are we trying to fool Hashem? We know, and Hashem certainly knows, that as soon as the Ten Days of Repentance are over we will probably give up our extra practices and go back to our usual behaviour! So is there any use trying to adopt these extra deeds?

Let's present three different answers to this question.

The psychology of change

Change can be hard. Rav Salanter teaches that it is more difficult to change one middah than to learn the entire Talmud. When we try to improve ourselves, the Yetzer Hara jumps into action and tries to prevent us from changing. He throws every argument that he can at us: “it's not for you”; “it's too difficult”, “you have to be more realistic”. Resisting these challenges and defeating the Yetzer Hara takes hard work.

One solution is to minimise the battle with our Yetzer Hara by saying upfront that the change is only temporary. A temporary change is much easier to accept psychologically. Taking on something small for only ten days seems more achievable. Hopefully though, after ten days, we will realise that the

¹ Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 603.

new practice is not as hard as we thought. Who knows, we might even decide to continue permanently!

Every mitzva counts

Imagine the following scenario. You are at school and there is a big exam coming up. The teacher gives the class the whole afternoon in the library for personal study. After monitoring the class for an hour the teacher leaves. The students take advantage of the situation, put down their school books and start to mess around. Was the first hour of study worthwhile? If the students failed to maintain their study for the entire afternoon is the first hour of earning a waste? The answer is obvious. What they gained during that first hour is real and valuable. This hour of study may even make the difference between passing and failing. Similarly, if we take on something extra for even ten days and we cannot maintain it for as long as we hoped, this short time that we did improve is precious and meaningful. The reward that we receive for **every** mitzva that we do is eternal. And that one mitzva could make the difference in our judgement.

The importance of beginnings

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

- the first fruits are brought as a gift to the Bet Hamikdash in an elaborate ceremony (see last week’s Parsha of Ki Tavo);
- 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;
- before eating our crops we must 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, many of them may only be consumed by the Kohanim in a state of purity and in the Bet Hamikdash.

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 compared to the remainder. They are thus held up as an example. However the rest of the crops do not retain such an elevated status. Though we may not remain at such an elevated level constantly, 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.

Similarly, by being extra careful at the beginning of the year we are demonstrating to Hashem and to ourselves our ultimate goal and aspirations. We can hold up our behaviour at the head of the year as an example of what we hope to achieve. This period of time can function as a template or reminder of what we are working towards for the remainder of the year.

Let’s try something this week:

Let’s take on something small and manageable for the Aseret Yemei Teshuva in each of the 3 areas of Divine service:

1. Ben adam l’Makom (between us and Hashem): _____
2. Ben adam l’chavero (between us and our other people): _____
3. Ben adam l’atzmo (between us and ourselves): _____

Darchai Noam will take a break for the Chagim and IY”H will return for its 4th year for Parshat Noach.

Shabbat shalom and Shana Tova, Rabbi Ledder

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About 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 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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