

## DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

### “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Nitzavim  
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[darchai.noam@gmail.com](mailto:darchai.noam@gmail.com)  
[www.darchai-noam.com](http://www.darchai-noam.com)

How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

### **Nitzavim – Do it for the Team!**

This week's Parasha of Nitzavim took place on the last day of Moshe's life. Moshe gathered the entire Jewish nation together and refreshed the covenant with them. But this covenant was slightly different, as it introduced the concept of Arevut – responsibility. Moshe taught that each Jew is not just responsible for their own behaviour, they are also responsible for ensuring that their fellow Jews keep the Torah. The Or HaChaim explains that this is why Moshe begins his speech by listing the segments of society that were gathered together – heads of tribes, elders, officers, men, women, children, converts. Each person's responsibility depended on their position in the strata of society and the extent of their sphere of influence. Leaders can influence many people. Others may only be able to influence a small group – the members of their family, their friends, work colleagues or students. But each of us is responsible for the people who we can influence. This means that rather than just focusing on ourselves, we should be looking outwards, at others.

A story is told about an elderly sage who would learn Torah 18 hours a day, every day.<sup>1</sup> As he became older, it became more difficult for him to keep up his rigorous schedule. His friends and family urged him to cut back and take it a bit easier. But he refused. He explained that as long as he was learning 18 hours a day, his inner circle of students would learn 16 hours a day. The other students in his yeshiva were inspired to learn 14 hours a day. Students in neighbouring yeshivot would learn 12 hours a day. Working people in the community would manage to learn for 6 hours a day. Workers in the outlying villages would learn 2 hours a day. And so on. At the extreme outlying village, there was a simple Jew who just managed to keep kashrut and Shabbat. The sage felt that if he would cut a few hours off his daily schedule his inner circle of students would most likely also cut back a little. The other students in the yeshiva would take note of this slackening and would also cut back. The effect may trickle down and he was concerned that this poor simple Jew in the extreme outlying village would cut back by stopping to keep kosher and Shabbat. And the great sage could not bear to have that on his conscience.

Most of us are not at the level of the great sage in this story. But we all lie somewhere on the spectrum of influence. We all have people who look up to us. The way that we behave can have an influence on them. We may not be aware of that influence, but it is real.

An example of this is the story that is told about a wealthy man from America who made an exceptionally generous donation to a yeshiva in Israel. He explained that when he was visiting the Kotel, he was captivated by a simple yeshiva bachur who was davening with intense kavana. He was so moved by this sight that he resolved to make the large donation. This bachur had no idea that his kavana had such a profound impact, but he will be credited for that in the World to Come. We too influence people all the time, even if we don't know it.

Living with this attitude means that we should strive to constantly focus on others and ask what we can do to help the community. The Chofetz Chaim is a perfect example of someone who lived this attitude. He realised that the Jewish people needed a clear digest of halacha that would bring all of

<sup>1</sup> I have heard a few versions of this story in relation to different sages. If anyone knows the authentic origins of this story, I would be grateful if you could let me know.

the opinions together and guide people how to live their lives. When no-one could take on this task, the Chofetz Chaim did it himself. He devoted 25 years to preparing the Mishnah Berurah – which until this day is an authoritative guide to Jewish life. The Chofetz Chaim wrote countless other works, which met the needs of the community. For instance, when he saw that people were lax with the laws of lashon hara, he wrote the sefer Chofetz Chaim and other works. When young Jewish males were being forcibly drafted into the army, he wrote a halachic guide for Jewish soldiers. His whole life revolved around looking at the broader community and asking: What needs to be done? What contribution can I make? How can I make the Jewish world better?

Attaching ourselves to the community has another benefit as well, especially at this time of year coming up to Rosh Hashanah. By focusing on others, we can tap into the merits of the community and enjoy extra Divine assistance. The mishnah in Pirkei Avot 2:2 advises us as follows:

*Those who work for the community should do so for the sake of Heaven; for then the merit of their ancestors shall aid them, and their righteousness shall endure forever. And you, [says G-d,] I shall credit you with great reward as if you have achieved it.*

There is a story in Tanach<sup>2</sup> about the prophet Elisha who was generously hosted by a childless couple in the town of Shunam. Elisha wanted to reciprocate the generosity and suggested that he could daven for something on their behalf. The Shunamite woman declined and said, “I sit in the midst of my people”. The Zohar explains that this story took place on Rosh Hashanah and Elisha the prophet was offering to daven for anything this couple needed personally. This righteous woman however did not want to focus on her own personal needs, especially at this auspicious time of judgment. When she responded that “she is in the midst of her people”, she meant that she just wanted to attach herself to the merits of the community and Elisha should daven for the whole community, not just her. (As a postscript, Elisha did daven for them, and they were blessed with a son.)

Who we can help is often governed by who we can influence. For instance, some of us can teach others. Actually, all of us can teach others! There is a saying “If you know Aleph Bet, find someone who only knows Aleph and teach them”. We can also help many people at a time by looking out for communal needs. For example, tidying the shul, returning a chumash to the bookshelf, filling up the soap in the shul bathroom. And remember, each one of us influences other people through our positive behaviour and by being a personal example. Do your bit for the community and you will maximise your chances for a sweet new year. Do it for Hashem’s people and Hashem will be delighted that His children are caring for each other. Don’t just do it for your own sake. Do it for the team!

Let’s try something this week:

1. Remember the story about the sage who was concerned that his actions would influence so many others. Remember that each of us have the ability to influence others in a positive way.
2. Leading up to Rosh Hashanah, try to do something extra for the community. Look around and find something that will help Hashem’s children - and do it.

This will be the last Darchai Noam for the year 5781. We will return B’ezrat Hashem after the chagim for Parashat Breishit 5782 – a shemittah year and the ninth year of Darchai Noam. Over the break I will be working on refurbishing the Darchai Noam website. I am hoping to upload every single back edition of Darchai Noam into an easily searchable format. More news to follow.

Shabbat Shalom and Shana Tova,

Rabbi Ledder

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<sup>2</sup> Melachim Bet (4:8-14) and see also Gemara Brachot Daf 10b which describes parts of this story.