

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Nitzavim-Vayelech, September 2017

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Nitzavim-Vayelech – decisions, decisions, decisions

In this week’s double Parsha of Nitzavim-Vayelech, Moshe’s stirring final speech is coming to its conclusion. Moshe is about to leave his ‘flock’ and he exhorts Bnei Yisrael with powerful advice.

“Today I call upon heaven and earth as witnesses [that I have warned you]: I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. And you shall choose life so that you and your children shall live.” (Devarim 30:19)

Moshe makes it clear to Bnei Yisrael that they are always faced with a choice between two options. If they choose one option it will lead to life and blessing. But if they choose the other option it will lead to death and curses. Bnei Yisrael has free choice. However, Hashem is warning them (through Moshe) to choose wisely.

Rashi presents a beautiful analogy to explain this scenario. It is analogous to a man who wishes to give a portion of his estate to his son as a gift. The man tells his son that he is free to choose whichever portion he wants. However, the man directs his son to the best portion and advises him: “This is the portion which you should choose for yourself”.

In theory this choice sounds so easy. Who wouldn’t want life and blessing over death and curses? But in practice it can be quite challenging. We all make countless decisions every day. Some of these decisions are evidently life-changing. Who should I marry? Where should I live? What job should I take? Some of the decisions are more mundane. Should I cross the road to give a coin to the beggar? Should I eat one more biscuit? Should I get out of bed now, or press the snooze button one more time?

When we make a decision, we are often trying to balance many different factors. Ultimately though, the choice is often dependent on the extent to which we focus on what Hashem wants us to do compared to our own self-interest. Do we make our decisions based on what is good for **me**? Or do we make those decisions based on what the Torah prescribes.

Hashem is teaching us that every choice we make should be based on what we believe Hashem wants us to do. Will this decision bring me closer to Hashem, or the opposite?

This reminds me of a joke.

A man walks into a Christian souvenir shop and picks up a baseball cap with the letters “WWJD” emblazoned on the front. “What do these letters stand for?” he asked the shop attendant. “What Would ‘J’ Do”, he replied. “It reminds you that whenever you have to make a decision you should stop and think what ‘J’ would do in those circumstances and then you will hopefully make the right decision”. “Well I know what he would do in this case” replied the man. “He wouldn’t spend \$75 on a stupid cap!”

L’havdil, we should also stop before each decision and think “What would Hashem want me to choose?” Sometimes, the answer to that question is straightforward, although making the choice in practice may still be difficult due to our selfish desires pulling us in the opposite direction.

Other times, the answer to the question can be very difficult. Aside from cases of pure halacha and avoiding aveirot, it is not always clear what Hashem wants us to do. In such grey areas, we should seek advice (for example from a Rav, preferably one who knows us well), daven to Hashem for guidance and clarity and spend quiet time contemplating the matter.

It is important to realise that in many cases it is not the choice itself but the decision making process that is the ikar (essence). This process can be precious if we struggle to work out what we think Hashem wants us to do, because in this way we are automatically coming closer to Hashem. Sometimes the actual decision itself is not so important. Our effort and struggle and our tears and prayers in trying to reach a decision are precious to Hashem.

What about the cases where we know what we should decide, but find it too daunting to start living our lives in that way? In these cases, a good approach is as follows:

- Change gradually
- Set ourselves goals and reward ourselves for spiritual victories
- Don't overly berate ourselves for setbacks
- Remember that Hashem is proud of us and He understands our struggles.
- Remember that Hashem would not give us commandments too difficult for us to keep.

We may find ourselves making excuses to avoid living our lives the way that Hashem wants, for example: "I am too old"; "it's too hard to change"; "what will people say about me?" We can take inspiration from Rabbi Akiva, who only started learning Torah when he was 40 years old. He would sit in cheder with the young boys to learn the aleph-bet, enduring their laughter and ridicule. However, he overcame the embarrassment (with the unbelievable support of his wife Rachel) and he grew to become the Gadol Hador and one of the greatest Torah scholars of all time.

The Torah is there for all of us to acquire. As Moshe teaches in this week's Parsha:

"For this commandment which I command you today is not concealed from you, nor is it far away. It is not in Heaven, that you should say "Who will go up to Heaven and acquire it for us and tell it to us so that we can fulfil it?" Nor is it across the sea, that you should say "Who will cross the sea and acquire it for us and tell it to us so that we can fulfil it?" Rather, it is very close to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can fulfil it." (Devarim 11-14)

We can all do it. We can all take the next step in our spiritual journey. Hashem will help us reach the destination. All we have to do is make the right choice.

Let's try something this week:

1. When making day-to-day decisions, try to make the effort to bring Hashem into the decision-making process. Remember that every decision can bring us closer to Hashem or the opposite. Try to make every decision based on what we think Hashem would want us to choose.
2. Remember Moshe's words to Bnei Yisrael. The Torah is very close to us. Though it may seem difficult initially, we can make the right decision and use this time leading up to Rosh Hashana to take the next step in our spiritual growth.

Darchai Noam will take a break for the Chagim. I wish everyone a Shana Tova U'metuakh, G'mar Chatimah Tova and Chag Sameach!

The next Darchai Noam will B"H be for the week of Parshat Noach (21 October / 1 Cheshvan).

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder.

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About Darchai Noam

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 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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