

## DARCHAI NOAM

### Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם -

(Mishlei 3:17)

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

### Re'eh – lessons from Avodah Zara

In this week's Parsha of Re'eh, Moshe instructs Bnei Yisrael to destroy every last vestige of avodah zara (idol worship) upon entering the Promised Land.

*You shall totally destroy all the places where the nations that you will inherit worshipped their gods, on the high mountains and the hills and under every leaf tree. (Devarim 12:2)*

It is difficult for us to relate to idol worship because we no longer have the desire for it. The Gemara<sup>1</sup> teaches that the Men of the Great Assembly saw that the temptation for idol worship was too strong for Bnei Yisrael to withstand. They fasted for 3 days, begging Hashem to remove this temptation. Hashem agreed. However, by granting this removal of the desire for idol worship, He correspondingly also removed prophecy from the world. The Men of the Great Assembly decided that this was a price worth paying.

Even though we can no longer relate to idol worship, we can still learn some lessons that apply to us today. The usual lesson that people learn is that we still have some vestiges of idol worship. Many people are guilty of a modern form of idol worship – whether it is wealth, power or celebrities. We may not bow down to statues anymore but whenever we ascribe power to something other than Hashem we are guilty of avodah zara.

However, let's try to learn a new lesson based on the passuk quoted above.

Why does the passuk mention that idol worship was under **every leafy tree**? There are two important physical characteristics of leafy trees:

- Trees are everywhere! You do not have to look hard to find a leafy tree. Most people have access to many trees not far from their house.
- Trees are a place of comfort. The leaves provide shade from the sun and they are an inviting place to sit and relax.

The physical conditions parallel the underlying spiritual realities. The 'leafy trees' represent convenience, ease, comfort and relaxation. We can now start to understand the appeal of idol worship. It is easy and comfortable. The idol worshipper did not have to put in much effort to attain a spiritual high. In today's language we would say that he could get whatever he wanted from the comfort of his own couch.

Let's compare that to the Jewish approach<sup>2</sup>. In the times of the Bet Hamikdash, someone who wanted to serve Hashem would have to travel to Jerusalem. Once again we can understand the spiritual reality by studying the physical conditions. As you travel towards Jerusalem from the coastal plain, the terrain starts to change. The land starts to get hilly and as you get closer to Jerusalem the hills turn into mountains. The Bet Hamikdash is located at the top of a mountain and it is hard work to climb the mountain.

<sup>1</sup> Sanhedrin 64a.

<sup>2</sup> The comparison of leafy trees to the mountainous terrain of Jerusalem was heard from Rabbi Ari Kahn.

The hard work of ascending to Jerusalem is spiritual as well as physical. As we see in Tehillim Chapter 24<sup>3</sup>:

*Who may ascend the mountain of Hashem and who may stand in the place of His sanctuary?  
One with clean hands and a pure heart, one who has not lifted up his soul unto vanity and has not sworn deceitfully. (Tehillim 24:3-4)*

Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch interprets “clean hands and a pure heart” to symbolise social justice in both theory and practice (ie the mitzvot between man and man). He interprets “one who has not lifted up his soul unto vanity and has not sworn deceitfully” as referring to the mitzvot between man and Hashem. This means that if we want a genuine spiritual experience, we have to put in effort. We have to climb the physical mountain and the spiritual mountain. We have to improve our middot and our performance of the mitzvot. We have to earn the spiritual high, which is not the case with avodah zara.

This can be quite daunting. However, it is important to note that the site of the Bet Hamikdash (on Har Habayit) is not the highest point in Jerusalem. There are some surrounding mountains that are actually higher. The location of the Bet Hamikdash has been compared to the choicest cut of beef, which is the shoulder of the cow – nearly the highest point on the animal, but not quite<sup>4</sup>. Perhaps the message that we can learn from this is that we don't have to make it right to the top. We must be willing to put in the hard work to improve our middot but Hashem recognises that we are only human and he does not expect us to be 100% successful. As we learn from Rabbi Tarfon in Pirkei Avot:

*“You are not required to complete the task, but you are not free to withdraw from it” (Pirkei Avot 3:21)*

Human beings generally tend to shy away from hard work. If there is a choice between an easy way (like avodah zara) and a harder way (like climbing to Jerusalem and genuine spiritual work) most people will choose the easier way. In Hebrew, ‘man’ is called ‘Adam’ symbolising that we come from the ground (the Adamah). According to Jewish mystical thought there are 4 basic elements that matter is created from – earth, fire, water and air.<sup>5</sup> Unlike the other 3 elements of fire, water and air, earth does not tend to move very much! However mountains are also made of earth. With effort, the lowly earth can be raised into a majestic mountain that reaches towards the heavens and Hashem. With hard work we can transform our natural tendency of earthiness and reach the spiritual heights of a mountain.

The world that we live in is a world of action, effort and work. As servants of Hashem we are required to put in the hard work to improve our middot and to improve the world. A genuine connection with Hashem obtained via proper service is more difficult to achieve than the “quick fix” of avodah zara. However the rewards are correspondingly much greater, both in this world and the next.

Let's try something this week:

1. During the Torah reading in shule, listen out for the warning against avodah zara in the middle of the first call up. Think about how this message applies to us today.
2. Choose one middah that we can improve. Remind ourselves that the achievement will require hard work, however the rewards will be eternal. The best way to achieve long lasting gain is to take on small and manageable steps and to be consistent. Make a plan and stick to it!

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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<sup>3</sup> Tehillim Chapter 24 is also the song of the day for Sunday which we recite at the then end of Shacharit (see page 162 of the standard Ashkenaz siddur).

<sup>4</sup> This comparison between the location of the Bet Hamikdash and the choicest part of the animal appears somewhere in the Gemara or the Midrash but I was not able to locate the source. If anyone can tell me the source I would be grateful.

<sup>5</sup> This idea is seen in Eastern philosophy and alternative medicine but it has a basis in Judaism.

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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 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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