בס"ד

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נעם

"Its ways are ways of pleasantness"

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Shoftim (Devarim 16:18–21:9)
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Shoftim – Facing in the right direction

Like last week, this week's Parsha of Shoftim contains a large portion of the 613 mitzvot. Amongst the many mitzvot listed are some of the gifts that Bnei Yisrael must give to the Kohanim.

> *The **first** of your grain, your wine and your oil and the **first** shearing of your flock of sheep you shall give to him. Because Hashem your G-d has chosen him from all of your tribes to stand and serve in the name of Hashem, he and his sons for all days.* (Devarim 18:4-5)

We are commanded to give the first of our crops to the Kohanim. It is as if we are giving gifts to Hashem, and Hashem directs those gifts to the Kohanim. The Kohanim have been selected to serve Hashem in the Bet Hamikdash so they can stand in Hashem's place (so to speak) and accept the gifts on His behalf. These gifts are important because the time spent serving in the Bet Hamikdash takes away from their ability to earn a livelihood. It seems appropriate that Bnei Yisrael give the gifts to the Kohanim because the Kohanim perform their service on behalf of the entire nation.

Halachically, beginnings, or 'firsts', are often treated in a more sanctified manner than subsequent things.[1] There are many examples:

- The first of our crops – we are forbidden to eat from our crops[2] until we separate terumah (a portion for the Kohanim as quoted above) and ma'asrot (tithes). Ma'aser rishon (the first tithe) is a gift for the Leviim. Ma'aser shaini (the second tithe which is separated in years 1, 2, 4 and 5 of the 7-year agricultural cycle) must be eaten in Yerushalayim.
- The first shearing – if we own a flock of sheep, the first shearing must be given as a gift to the Kohanim.
- Pidyon HaBen – there is a special sanctity associated with first born sons and they must be redeemed from the Kohanim.
- First fruits and the first born of kosher domesticated animals – these are given to the Kohanim and must be consumed within the walls of Yerushalayim.

In most cases, these 'firsts' become sanctified and must be consumed in a sanctified manner:

- Some of the 'firsts' can only be consumed by the holiest members of the people, i.e. the Kohanim. For example, it is forbidden for anyone other than Kohanim and their families and slaves to eat terumah.

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[1] This is based on an idea heard from Rav Zev Leff.

[2] Except in certain limited circumstances, such as an informal snack in the field.

- The ‘firsts’ must be consumed in the holiest places. Some of the gifts to the Kohanim must be consumed within the Bet Hamikdash; other must be consumed within Yerushalayim. Ma’aser shaini must also be consumed in Yerushalayim. If there is too much ma'aser shaini to carry, then it can be redeemed with money – but the money must be spent on food in Yerushalayim.
- The ‘firsts’ must be consumed in a state of purity. For instance, terumah must be kept ritually pure and the person consuming the terumah must also be in a state of purity.

In effect, we are taking the first of our crops, our flocks, our sheep etc. and elevating those ‘firsts’ into a state of kedusha. We can learn an important lesson from the fact that only the first portion of our belongings needs to be sanctified, not all of our belongings. This acknowledges that we are only human. Consuming everything in a sanctified manner would be too difficult. We are not at that level. But by elevating the ‘firsts’, we are reminded of which way we should be facing – i.e. towards kedusha, towards more holiness. It points our minds and actions in the right direction at the beginning of each process.

There is an important application of this idea that is relevant to this time of year.[3] We are just entering Elul and the countdown towards Rosh Hashanah and the Aseret Y'mai Teshuvah. There is a custom to take on something extra during this time (in the form of a new mitzva or working on a particular middah). In the beginning we may be fuelled by inspiration and the additional Kedusha of the Yamim Noraim. However, after that we might find ourselves slipping. However, though we might not achieve our original levels, at least we have set a benchmark towards which we can aim. By being extra ‘good’ as the new year begins, we are demonstrating to Hashem and to ourselves where our priorities lie. We are facing the right direction. Our behaviour at the head of the year can be held up as an example of what we hope to achieve and what we are working towards.

This idea is also relevant to our interpersonal relationships. On the one hand, we can strive to reach high levels in our interpersonal dealings and to have exemplary middot. On the other hand, it is important to acknowledge that we are only human and we cannot always achieve the high standards that we may set for ourselves. We need to keep this in mind and not judge ourselves too harshly when we slip up. As long as we are facing in the right direction and making an honest attempt, we should try to be understanding of our own mistakes and the mistakes of other people.

Let's try something this week:

1. Let’s prepare for a positive start to the new year and plan something extra that we can take on over this period, especially over the ten days of repentance. This new thing that we take on will preferably be something that is small and manageable.
2. When we see that someone (including ourselves) has made an honest mistake or failing, try to be understanding and gentle in our criticism. Remember that we are all human with human frailties.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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[3] This application of the idea was also heard from Rav Zev Leff.