

DARCHAI NOAM

Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם

(Mishlei 3:17)

Ki Tisa, March 2015

darchai.noam@gmail.com

How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Ki Tisa – Emulating Hashem by controlling our anger

In this week's Parsha we read about the sin of the golden calf. Moshe goes up Har Sinai for 40 days to receive the luchot (10 commandments) from Hashem. Bnei Yisrael miscalculate the days and presume that Moshe will not be returning. Panicking, Bnei Yisrael build a golden calf to whom they can pray. This sin occurs about 40 days after Hashem commanded Bnei Yisrael that they must not worship idols. Hashem is angry and he threatens to wipe out Bnei Yisrael. Moshe defends Bnei Yisrael valiantly to Hashem. Hashem agrees to forgive Bnei Yisrael and He invites Moshe to return to the top of Har Sinai to receive a second set of luchot.

Before Hashem gives Moshe the second set of luchot, he teaches Moshe the 13 Middot (the 13 Divine attributes of mercy). This prayer contains 13 Names and descriptions of Hashem, each of them referring to His compassion in various situations.¹ Hashem taught this prayer to Moshe at this point in time to avert another national catastrophe like the sin of the golden calf. Hashem guarantees that if Bnei Yisrael perform this prayer service of the 13 Middot then He will forgive them (Gemara, Rosh Hashanah 17b). In times of crisis, when we need Hashem's help, we can always call out this prayer. It's a key part of our prayers on Yom Kippur, fast days and the slichot service. In Nusach Sefard it is recited every day as part of Viduy (confession) which is recited before Tachanun.

It sounds too good to be true. All we have to do is recite the 13 attributes of mercy and Hashem will answer our prayers! This is reminiscent of another teaching – one who recites Ashrei 3 times a day is guaranteed a place in the World to Come (Gemara Brachot 4b). (That is why we recite Ashrei 3 times a day – twice in Shacharit and once in Mincha). This also sounds too good to be true! Does this mean that, regardless of our actions, reciting Ashrei 3 times a day guarantees us a ticket to the World to Come? It's actually not that simple. The Mishnah Berurah teaches that we need to have proper kavana (concentration) when reciting Ashrei. Mindlessly reciting the words is not sufficient. If we could say Ashrei 3 times a day with proper kavana we can't help but internalise the message of Ashrei and change as a person.

Similarly, with the 13 attributes of mercy, mindless recitation is not sufficient. The Gemara from Rosh Hashanah quoted above says that Bnei Yisrael has to **perform** the prayer; it doesn't say that Bnei Yisrael has to **recite** the prayer. In this case, we need to pay attention to the meaning of the attributes and **try to adopt them**. If we can emulate Hashem and try our best to act in accordance with these attributes of mercy then we will truly be deserving of Hashem's mercy.

So let us take a look at one of those attributes of mercy. Hashem is described as Erech Apayim, which means slow to anger.

The Rambam² advises us to follow the middle path in our character traits – to avoid going to either extreme. However, the Rambam gives two exceptions to this rule - anger and pride. The

¹ Artscroll Stone edition of the Chumash, footnote to Sh'mot 34:5-7.

² Hilchot Deot 2:2-3

Rambam advises us to distance ourselves from anger as much as possible. We can pretend to be angry if we need to teach someone a lesson (eg our kids) but we should not feel angry inside.

The Gemara³ teaches us that anger causes wisdom to depart from the wise and prophecy to depart from the prophets. The Gemara⁴ also compares someone who gets angry to an idol worshipper!

Pirkei Avot (5:14) lists four types of temperament. One who is slow to anger and quick to be appeased is pious. One who is quick to anger and slow to be appeased is wicked. One who is slow to anger but slow to be appeased is more ideal than someone who is quick to anger but quick to be appeased. Why? Perhaps because one who is quick to anger is angry more often. One who is slow to anger generally has a calm demeanour which offsets the damage caused by their occasional outbursts.

It is interesting that Pirkei Avot passes judgement on the relative merits of the four types of temperament. This presupposes that we can control our anger. Otherwise it would be unfair to judge. We can all control our angry responses, no matter what our genetic makeup.

Some of our great leaders worked on their anger to an unbelievable level. There is a well-known story about Hillel that appears in the Gemara:⁵

Hillel was known as someone who never got angry. Two people made a bet - the one who could succeed in making Hillel angry would win the bet and receive a large sum of money. One of the men went late on a Friday afternoon when Hillel was busy showering for Shabbat. He stood in the street and called out for Hillel in a rude manner. Hillel patiently got dressed, came outside and said "Yes my son, how can I help you?" The man said that he had an important question to ask and then proceeded to ask a silly question that could quite easily have waited until a more convenient time. Hillel patiently answered the question and then returned to his Shabbat preparations. The man then repeated the whole performance a number of times, but each time Hillel had the same response: "Yes my son, how can I help you?" No matter how hard the man tried he could not get Hillel to lose his temper. Eventually the man cursed Hillel and blamed him for causing him to lose the bet. Hillel responded that it is better to lose the bet and to lose a large sum of money than to lose your temper.

We should try our best to emulate Hillel. However it is unrealistic to expect us to get close to his level of control. Each one of us needs to work out where we are holding and try to make a small and lasting improvement. The following is one piece of advice that we can follow to help us work on our anger. It comes from the Iggeret HaRamban - the Ramban's letter that he wrote to his eldest son with instructions to read it weekly.

"Get into the habit of always speaking calmly to everyone. This will keep you from anger, a serious character flaw which causes people to sin."

Let's try something this week:

1. When you hear the 13 middot being read out from the Torah in shule – remember that our job is to emulate Hashem and take on His character traits to the best of our ability.
2. Try to follow the Ramban's advice – get into the habit of speaking calmly to everyone.

Shabbat shalom,

³ Pesachim 66b.

⁴ Shabbat 105b.

⁵ Shabbat 31a.

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'reiacha kamocho' – loving one's fellow as oneself.

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