

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Ki Tisa
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How can the Parasha 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. After the revelation when Hashem appeared to the entire nation, Moshe went up Har Sinai for 40 days to receive the Luchot Habit (Ten Commandments) from Hashem. Bnei Yisrael miscalculated the number of days and feared that Moshe would not return. Panicking, Bnei Yisrael built a golden calf to whom they could pray instead. This sin occurred only 40 days after Hashem commanded Bnei Yisrael that they must not worship idols. Hashem is understandably angry and threatens to wipe out Bnei Yisrael. Moshe defends Bnei Yisrael valiantly and Hashem agrees to forgive them. 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, He will forgive their sins.² 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 Selichot service. In Nusach Sefard it is recited every day as part of Viduy (confession) which is recited before Tachanun.

This 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 Come³. (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 explains 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 couldn't help but internalise the message of Ashrei and change as a person.

Similarly, with the 13 Attributes of Mercy, mindless recitation is not necessarily sufficient to obtain the positive effect. The Gemara from Rosh Hashanah quoted above says that Bnei Yisrael has to **perform** the prayer, not simply that Bnei Yisrael has to **recite** the prayer. This suggests that we must 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, middah k'neged middah⁴.

Let's take a look at one of those Attributes of Mercy. Hashem is described as being “Erech Apayim”, which means slow to anger.

The Rambam⁵ 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 – for the traits of anger and pride. The Rambam advises us to distance ourselves from anger as much as possible. Though we can pretend to be angry if this is appropriate in order to teach someone a lesson (for instance our children), we should not feel genuine anger inside.

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

² Gemara, Rosh Hashanah 17b.

³ Gemara Brachot 4b.

⁴ “Measure for measure”.

⁵ Hilchot De'ot 2:2-3

The Gemara⁶ teaches us that anger causes wisdom to depart from the wise and prophecy to depart from the prophets. The Gemara⁷ also compares someone who gets angry to an idol worshipper!

Pirkai Avot (5:14) lists four types of temperaments. One who is slow to anger and quick to be appeased is considered 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 Pirkai Avot passes judgement on the relative merits of the four types of temperament. This presupposes that we can control our anger. Otherwise, surely it would be unfair to judge us. This suggests that we can all control our angry responses, no matter what our genetic makeup may be.

Rabbi Yisroel Reisman⁸ provides a very powerful parable for what it means to emulate Hashem in this character trait of being slow to anger and tolerant.

Imagine that you are an audio engineer at a public lecture. You are responsible for making sure that the microphones are working properly and that the speakers can be heard clearly. One of the speakers steps up to the podium and begins to speak. You are shocked to hear the speaker spewing forth terrible lies about you! He continues a horrible diatribe of embarrassing and horrific claims about you personally, all of which are totally untrue. All of a sudden, the annoying sound of microphone feedback⁹ begins and the speaker can no longer be heard. As the sound engineer, you are responsible for fixing up the sound system. But you are relieved that there is finally an end to this speaker's cruel words. All you have to do is... nothing. Just sit back and let the microphone feedback continue. What would Hashem do in this situation? Hashem continues to actively sustain and give life to people who deny His very existence, such as idol worshippers and wicked people! To emulate Hashem, you would need to fix up the sound system and allow the speaker to continue his speech! How many of us could honestly say that this is what we would do in these circumstances?

We should try our best to emulate Hashem by controlling our anger. For most of us, it would be unrealistic to reach this level of control. However, each one of us needs to work out where we are holding and try to make a small and lasting improvement.

One practical piece of advice we can try to follow in order to reduce our anger 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 try to take on His character traits to the best of our ability.
2. If you would like to work on emulating Hashem by being "slow to anger", you can try to follow the Ramban's advice – get into the habit of speaking calmly to everyone.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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⁶ Pesachim 66b.

⁷ Shabbat 105b.

⁸ This idea appears in Rabbi Reisman's book "Pathways of the Prophets".

⁹ For those who are interested: "What is microphone feedback? Microphone feedback is a positive gain loop between a microphone and a loudspeaker. Speakers amplify the microphone signal and the microphone picks up the sound from the speakers. This positive gain loop continues and the system overloads, resulting in the terrible screech of microphone feedback." <https://mynewmicrophone.com/microphone-feedback/>