

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?

Parashat Ki Tisa – The kedusha of a shul (part 3)

This week’s Parasha of Ki Tisa begins with further details about the building of the Mishkan and then describes the sin of the Golden Calf. We will continue to focus on our “Mikdash Me’at”, the shul - its holiness and some of the relevant halachot that apply.

In today’s connected world, there are very few times when we can be truly ‘off-line’ and unreachable. It used to be that we could not be reached while on an airplane flight. An international flight was a chance to relax and catch up on reading, safe in the knowledge that we could not be disturbed. That is no longer the case. The last bastion is probably the shower. If someone tries to reach you while you are in the shower they just have to wait. It is probably only a matter of time until they come out with a waterproof device that allows you to check your email and take calls while in the shower.

But Hashem has blessed us with sanctuaries when we can switch off. For instance, in the realm of time, Shabbat provides us with a weekly opportunity to go ‘off-line’ and rejuvenate. The same applies to Yom Tov. Of course, Shabbat and Yom Tov are infinitely more than just a time to relax. Shabbat is a taste of the World to Come and a day to connect with Hashem. It is a weekly reminder of the reason for our creation. Yom Tov is a time to tap into special spiritual forces that are accessible at certain times of the year. Nevertheless, these special times are also a welcome sanctuary from the frenzied activity of the week.

I remember talking with my old boss at my law firm in Australia. He was not Jewish, but he was fascinated by the idea of Shabbat. As a typical hard-working partner in a large corporate law firm, he was available for clients 24 hours a day. He confided in me that he wanted to switch off his phone for one day a week so that he could relax and spend time with his family.¹ Unfortunately he never succeeded in putting his plans into practice. As soon as he picked up a newspaper and read an article about commerce he would be drawn back into the world of work. The moment he saw the LED light flashing on his phone he felt compelled to check his messages.

It can take enormous self-control to properly keep a day of rest if one is not commanded to do so. On the other hand, even though we are commanded to keep Shabbat, we can only fully appreciate the beauty of this special day if we keep its laws. If we don’t carefully guard the detailed laws of Shabbat, we will find that the feeling of kedusha will start to dissipate. If we talk about our work and read articles that are not appropriate for Shabbat, we will be pulled away from the magic of Shabbat and back into the mundane weekday world. Shabbat can only ‘work its magic’ if we keep its laws.

As well as these sanctuaries in the realm of time, Hashem has also provided us with sanctuaries in the realm of space. Just like Shabbat, the shul should be a place where we can escape from the busyness of the world around us. There are a number of parallels between Shabbat (our sanctuary in time) and shul (our sanctuary in space):

- Shabbat is an opportunity for amazing spiritual gain as we experience a taste of the World to Come. Similarly, shul can be an opportunity for amazing spiritual gain as we stand in prayer before the Shechinah.
- Shabbat provides us with some breathing space and a break from the week. Similarly, shul can provide us with some breathing space and a break from our busy day.

¹ Note that it is actually forbidden for a non-Jew to keep Shabbat properly (Gemara Sanhedrin 58b).

- Shabbat can only work its magic if we keep its laws. Similarly, shul can only be a true sanctuary for us if we act properly and keep the relevant halachot.

Just as we would (hopefully) never dream of bringing our phones and work with us into Shabbat. We should also treat our shuls with the same sense of holy detachment from the mundane.

In that light, let us take a brief look at some of the halachot that govern our behaviour in shul.

The Shulchan Aruch² rules as follows:

- While in a shul or bet midrash, one may not behave with lightheaded behaviour, such as laughter, humour or idle chatter, nor may one eat or drink, groom oneself or wander about.³
- One may not use the shul to escape the weather, neither for shade when it's hot nor for shelter when it's raining. (If one was already learning before it started raining, it is permitted to enter a shul or bet midrash so that the rain does not interrupt their learning.⁴)
- One may not make financial calculations in a shul unless they are mitzva related, for example, in relation to the tzedakah fund, money for the redemption of captives or making donations when receiving an aliya to the Torah.
- One may not sleep in a shul, even just to take a nap (not even during the sermon!). But napping in a bet midrash is permitted since one (hopefully) spends long periods of time there and it is difficult to avoid napping.⁵

The Mishnah Berurah⁶ writes that it is prohibited to have a conversation related to one's business or idle conversation in a shul. The sin of prohibited speech (such as lashon hara or gossip) is magnified when spoken in a shul or bet midrash. The Mishnah Berurah adds that one who is careful to heed Hashem's word should always be particularly careful not to speak about any mundane matter in shul and should use the shul exclusively for Torah and prayer.

Talking during the chazan's repetition of the Amidah is particularly serious. The Shulchan Aruch⁷ speaks very strongly against one who discusses idle matters during the chazan's repetition. The Piskei Teshuvot writes that the sin of talking during chazarat hashatz is so severe that poskim write if a person knows that he will not be able to restrain himself from talking during chazarat hashatz it is better if he does not come to shul altogether!⁸ Though this should not be relied upon as a halachic ruling without first checking with your Rabbi, it clearly demonstrates the significance of talking during the chazan's repetition.

Remember, the degree to which we recognise Hashem's presence in shul, and treat our shul with respect, is the degree to which we can benefit from it as a true sanctuary. If we keep the halachot properly, then every time we enter the shul it can be a delightful, spiritually uplifting experience. It really can. But it's up to us!

Let's try something this week:

1. Review the halachot listed above that apply to our behaviour in shul and try to put them into practice.
2. When walking into shul, make a conscious effort to feel Hashem's Presence there and shed your involvement in the mundane. Leave your weekday worries at the door!

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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² Orach Chaim Siman 151.

³ Some permit drinking water, tea or coffee in shul but only while learning (Halacha Berurah siman 151).

⁴ Mishnah Berurah seif katan 4.

⁵ Mishnah Berurah seif katan 16.

⁶ Seif katan 2.

⁷ Orach Chaim 124: 7. One who is able to do so is encouraged to read the Shulchan Aruch's words inside.

⁸ פסקי תשובות, אות ז