

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Tazria
April 2022 / Nissan 5782

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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Parashat Tazria – Speak softly and carry a big stick

This week we read Parashat Tazria which deals mainly with the laws of tzora'at and also with the impurity that follows from childbirth. Someone who was afflicted with these forms of impurity was precluded from participating in matters relating to the Mishkan. Part of the purification process involved bringing korbanot. We will continue with our series on tefillah, which replaces the offering of korbanot today.

Korbanot

Given that our tefillot replace the korbanot, it is appropriate to recite various portions that relate to the korbanot before we daven.¹ The Bet Yosef writes that reading these portions provides us with a degree of atonement, similar to if we had actually offered a korban in the Bet Hamikdash. The Mishnah Berurah² adds that it is not enough to merely read these portions, one must focus on the meaning of the words and the concepts.

Many people skip over the korbanot, but it is a worthy practice to read them before Shacharit, in particular:

- Parashat HaTamid: which describes the daily korban tamid that was brought twice a day, every single day, in the Bet HaMikdash
- Mishnayot Eizehu Mekoman: which is a chapter of Mishnayot that summarises the halachot relating to the various korbanot. This is the only chapter of Mishnayot in the entire Shas that includes no machloket.
- Parashat Ketoret: which discusses the incense that was offered daily. The kabbalists explain that this paragraph is particularly important to recite if one needs a refuah.³

Some also have the practice of reciting korbanot before Mincha. Just like Shacharit replaces the morning korban tamid, Mincha replaces the afternoon korban tamid, and the same reasons for reciting these passages should apply. The Ashkenaz, Hebrew-only version of the Artscroll siddur⁴ includes the korbanot before Mincha,⁵ but it is less common amongst Ashkenazim to recite korbanot at this point.⁶

If one has some time before beginning one's tefillot it is worth looking at these portions. It reminds us that our tefillot replace the korbanot and can help us to be in the right frame of mind as we commence our tefillot.

Positioning the feet

When we pray the Shemoneh Esreh, the highlight of our tefillah, the Shulchan Aruch rules that we should stand with our feet next to one another as though we only have one foot, in order to resemble the angels.⁷

Why do we stand with our feet together? R' Yona⁸ explains that when we pray, we want to separate totally from the physical world of physical concerns and be like angels. The Mahari Abuhav⁹ explains that during the

¹ Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 1:5.

² Seif katan 13.

³ The incense was made of a number of different spices which all had to be in the exact proportion. Perhaps this relates to our bodies that contain many different components that all have to be balanced for good health.

⁴ סדור נר נפתלי השלם

⁵ Page 104.

⁶ Those with a standard English Artscroll siddur who wish to recite korbanot before mincha (perhaps you got to shul early and have nothing else to do!) should recite the passage of Korban HaTamid (page 32-34), Ketoret (page 34 until 'Abaye' on p38) and Anah B'koach (page 40).

⁷ Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 95:1. Based on Yechezkel 1:7 which describes angels: "And their legs were a straight leg".

⁸ A Rishon who lived in the 13th Century, mainly in Spain, a cousin of the Ramban, famous for his ethical work 'The Gates of Repentance' (שערי תשובה).

⁹ 14th Century Spain, the teacher of the teacher of Rav Yosef Caro (the Bet Yosef and the author of the Shulchan Aruch).

Shemoneh Esreh we are standing before Hashem, and keeping our feet together demonstrates that we want to stay put and not leave.

The Maharal of Prague explains that angels have one foot because they don't progress. Humans on the other hand have two feet because we can move forwards and progress (or the opposite, if we choose to do so). So why do we stand like angels at the time of tefillah? Because the time that we stand before Hashem is not the time to progress. We stand before Hashem and ask for our needs, and only when we step out of our davening do we return to the world of action and continue with our efforts to move forward and progress.

Rav Shimshon Dovid Pincus¹⁰ provides an analogy that seems appropriate to tefillah. Imagine someone who goes to a grocery store in the middle of the day and sees that the store is closed. They are concerned that there are no groceries available. But then they find out that an enormous shipment of Pesach products has just arrived¹¹ and the workers are busy stocking the shelves. The store will soon be open and full of products, but it first needs to be replenished. Similarly, the time of tefillah is not a time to act or interact with the world, but rather it is a time to stand still and request our needs. Hashem will replenish our resources, and give us what we need, and then we will be able to act.

Positioning the hands

The Shulchan Aruch rules that while davening we should place our hands over our heart with the right hand over the left, and stand as a slave before his master, in awe, fear and trepidation.¹² Why does one place the right hand over the left hand? This could be a hint for the need to subdue the yetzer hara which is on the left side. (Of course if you need your hands to hold your siddur, that takes priority.)

The Mishnah Berurah brings the practice of the Ramak¹³ who would tuck his thumbs into his palms while davening. What is the significance of this? We can suggest the following.

There is well-known negotiating tactic: "speak softly and carry a big stick". This most famously refers to US President Theodore Roosevelt's foreign policy. It was understood that if the other side did not acquiesce to the US's 'requests', the US would not be afraid to use its military capability to full effect.¹⁴ The idea is to negotiate peacefully but be willing to use strength if necessary. This is a great tactic to use when engaging with foreign powers, negotiating a business deal, or convincing your 8-year old to tidy their room. But this is the exact opposite of the way that we speak to Hashem!

The Mahari Abuhav writes that the way to position one's hands depends on the custom of that locale – one should stand in the way that they would stand before a king. When one stands before a king, one does not carry a big stick! In fact, just the opposite. For example, in some places the custom was to daven with one's hands behind their back as if they do not have hands and are powerless to act in the presence of the king.

So what is the idea of tucking in your thumbs? Humans are one of the only creations that have opposable thumbs.¹⁵ An opposable thumb means that the thumb can touch the tips of all of the fingers on the same hand. This is a very powerful ability that Hashem gave us as it allows us to grasp and handle objects in a very dexterous manner. Without an opposable thumb we would be severely limited in our ability to create and operate machinery and technology. So when we stand before Hashem in prayer, it is appropriate to hide our thumbs, as if we have no "power" to act and are humbling ourselves before the only true Power.

Let's try something this week:

1. If you don't already do so, try to spend some time reading the korbanot before tefillah. (Warning – you might need to get to shul a little early in order to accomplish this!)
2. Try to focus on how you stand and position your hands when you pray. Remember – you are standing before the King of kings.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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¹⁰ In his book, Nefesh Shimshon, Shabbos Kodesh. This idea was presented by Rav Pincus in relation to Shabbat, but it seems to apply equally to tefillah.

¹¹ Friendly reminder – Pesach is getting close, for those that didn't realise.

¹² Orach Chaim 95:3.

¹³ Rav Moshe Cordovero, author of Tomer Devorah, and the head of the kabbalists in Tzfat before the Arizal.

¹⁴ President Roosevelt actually never had a large army at his disposal, but he had a world-class navy.

¹⁵ Opposable thumbs are very rare in the world, other animals that have them include apes, some monkeys and the koala!