

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Acharai Mot
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Parashat Acharai Mot – More Imagination

Due to the 8th day of Pesach falling on Shabbat, this week Parashat Acharai Mot is read in chutz l'Aretz whereas Parashat Kedoshim is read in Israel. Israel and the rest of the world will be 'out of sync' and reading different Parshiyot for a total of 15 weeks!¹ Regardless, this week we will continue with our series on tefillah.

In the previous edition of Darchai Noam (being Parashat Metzora) we began to explore the role of imagination in helping us to have better kavana during our tefillah.

First, in relation to the Song of the Sea, we discussed the idea brought in the Mishnah Berurah² that when reciting this song we should imagine as if we are crossing the sea that very day and then imagine that we are thanking Hashem for performing this amazing miracle for us.

We then cited the idea brought in the Mishnah Berurah³ that we should imagine during the recitation of the Kedusha that we are looking up into the Heavens and Hashem Himself is right there looking back at us!

Chovot HaTalmidim

The Chovot HaTalmidim discusses how imagination can help us with our tefillah.⁴ In the chapter on “Advice on Spiritual Elevation and Self-Improvement”, he writes the following beautiful words:

“If you still find it difficult to imagine yourself standing before Hashem, with your soul active and excited in prayer... then try the following... Fix your eyes upon the sky and reflect deeply. Make a concentrated effort to think, “I am standing here, on this side, but on the other side of the heavens is a totally different world. The [angels] and the souls of the Avot, Nevi'im and Tzaddikim are there, and Hashem – Great, Holy and Awesome – is among them, sitting on His Holy Throne”. Be strong, look and think to yourself: “...Regardless of whether or not I can see You, I am straining my eyes; I am looking at You, and bless and speak to You Hashem!”

“...tell My children what I do when they say the prayer of Kedusha. Teach them that their eyes should be lifted up toward [Heaven]... for I have no greater pleasure than the time that their eyes are lifted toward My eyes and I look back at them. At that moment, I hold on to My throne of Glory... and I embrace and kiss them (i.e. every single Jew). I remember their exile and hasten their redemption.”

Just imagine it: We look toward the Heavens into Hashem's eyes, so to speak, and He looks back at us – and He derives pleasure from this encounter with us. It's like a father and a son who are gazing at each other, and the father loves his son so much that he can't hold himself back – He grabs hold of me, His son, and hugs and kisses me. The heart melts, the soul bursts with excitement and calls out: “My Father, HaKadosh Baruch Hu, I'm coming, I'm flying toward You!”

The Rebbe of Piaseczna bring us up to the highest of heights. These words are worth reading again and again, particularly before we daven. If we manage to truly internalise these words, we will surely find that we look forward to each opportunity to daven!

¹ For more information on this topic, I recommend “Why Israel and Chutz La'Aretz Read Different Parshas (And Why We Don't Re-Align Sooner)” by Rabbi Jack Abramowitz (<https://outorah.org/p/49153/>).

² Siman 51, seif katan 17.

³ Mishnah Berurah, Siman 125 seif katan 5.

⁴ Chovot HaTalmidim (The Student's Obligation) was written by the Rebbe of Piaseczna, Rav Kalonymous Kalmish Shapira, who was murdered in the Holocaust. The quotes are taken from the Feldheim translation (p187-189).

Standing in the place of the Kodesh Hakodashim

The Mishnah Berurah⁵ explains that while davening one should have in mind that he is standing in the Mikdash in Yerushalayim in the place of the Kodesh Hakodashim.

The Shulchan Aruch⁶ 94:1 rules that when one stands to daven, if they are outside of Eretz Yisrael they should face Eretz Yisroel and have in mind as well Yerushalayim, the Bet Hamikdash and the Kodesh Hakodashim. If one is in Eretz Yisrael, one should face Yerushalayim and should have in mind as well the Bet Hamikdash and the Kodesh Hakodashim. If one is in Yerushalayim, one should face the Bet Hamikdash and should have in mind the Kodesh Hakodashim.

During davening

The idea mentioned in the previous paragraph, that one should have in mind that they are standing in the place of the Kodesh Hakodashim, only applies before beginning tefillah. Ideally, during the recitation of the actual tefillah itself, one should be focusing on the meaning of the words.⁷

The Shulchan Aruch adds that, while davening, one should imagine the Divine Presence in front of him and should remove all thoughts that would burden him until he is focusing exclusively on his davening.

If we were appearing before a king of flesh and blood, we would surely prepare our words and concentrate so that we should not make a mistake. So certainly we should do so when conversing with Hashem, Who examines a person's thoughts.

This was the practice of the pious one who were mighty in their actions and would meditate during their tefilla to the point that they were released from their bodies and strengthened their minds until they almost reached the level of prophecy!

What should we do if a stray thought enters our mind while davening? The Shulchan Aruch advises that we should be silent until the thought goes away. He adds that one must think about things that subdue one's heart to our Father in Heaven and should not think about light-headed matters.

The Rama adds that before davening one should contemplate Hashem's Exaltedness and the lowliness of man and one should remove all pleasures from his heart. (Don't be surprised though that when you try to do this, mundane thoughts or superficial pleasures will pop into your mind to 'rebel' and thwart your attempts.)

Aleinu

Let's finish our section on imagination by focusing on the prayer of Aleinu which is recited after each of the three tefilot of Shacharit, Mincha and Maariv.

The Mishnah Berurah⁸ writes that Aleinu should be recited with fear and awe since the angels listen and Hashem stands with his ministers and they respond אשרי העם שככה לו אשרי העם שה' אלקיו ("Praiseworthy is the people that has this; praiseworthy is the people whose G-d is Hashem")⁹.

The Bach¹⁰ suggests that the reason for reciting Aleinu at the end of davening is to reinforce in our hearts the Unity of Hashem's Kingdom before we return home. The Mishnah Berurah¹¹ adds that one is obligated to bow when he says the words ואנחנו כורעים so that it does not appear as though he is denying Hashem. The Rema writes that Aleinu is recited while standing and one should be careful to concentrate while he recites this prayer. If we truly imagine that Hashem and the angels are listening to us, it is easier to concentrate while reciting this prayer.

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to read or contemplate the above words of the Piaseczna Rebbe before starting our davening.
2. Before you start to daven, imagine that you are actually standing in the Bet Hamikdash in Yerushalayim, in the place of the Kodesh Hakodashim! The holiest place in the world!

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

⁵ Seif katan 3.

⁶ Orach Chaim siman 94, seif 1.

⁷ Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim siman 98, seif 1.

⁸ Siman 132, seif katan 8.

⁹ Tehillim 144:15 (one of the introductory verses to the tefillah of Ashrei).

¹⁰ Orach Chaim, Siman 233.

¹¹ Seif katan 9.