

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Emor
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Parashat Emor – The importance of a minyan

This week we read Parashat Emor in chutz l’Aretz and Parashat Behar in Israel. We will continue with our series on tefillah, focusing on the importance and benefit of davening with a minyan, and how to conduct oneself during the Chazan’s repetition of the Shemoneh Esreh.

The Shulchan Aruch¹ rules that men should make an effort to daven in a shul with the tzibbur (congregation). At a minimum this means 10 men over the age of Barmitzvah. But we will see that there is a benefit to davening with a larger group if possible. The Mishnah Berurah² explains, in the name of the Chayai Adam, that the main benefit of davening with the tzibbur is in order to daven Shemoneh Esreh together. Many people mistakenly assume that the main reason for a minyan is to recite kaddish or barchu together. Therefore, one should make an effort to arrive at shul in time to daven Shemoneh Esreh together with the minyan.

When we are in shul, we should be careful to avoid turning our backs to the Aron Kodesh. This applies when leaving shul³ and also when the Kohanim step down from the duchan after Birkat Kohanim. One should try to walk backwards or at least sideways. However, when the Kohanim actually bless the tzibbur they themselves turn their backs to the Aron Hakodesh! The Bet Yosef quotes R’ Yitzchak⁴ who teaches that based on this fact, we learn to fear and respect the tzibbur – since the Kohanim themselves turn their faces to the people and their back to the Shechinah out of respect for the congregation!

The prisoner’s dilemma

The Radvaz⁵ brings a fascinating case of a Jewish captive who was given permission from his captor to leave prison for one day to daven in a shul with a minyan. The prisoner was not sure which day to choose to exercise this privilege, so he sent the question to the Radvaz. (Before reading the answer in the next paragraph, have a think about what answer you would give to this question.)

The Radvaz thought about which day would be most appropriate for the prisoner to choose. The obvious choice was to wait for Yom Kippur. But perhaps, he wrote, it would be better to wait for Purim so he could hear the Megillah in public, since in some respects, Purim is considered even greater than Yom Kippur. In the end, the Radvaz concluded that the prisoner should choose the very next available opportunity, even if that meant Maariv on a regular Tuesday night! The Radvaz based his decision on a number of reasons. If the prisoner would wait until a later day, who knows if the captor will change his mind? And who knows if the prisoner will live until the next Yom Kippur or Purim? Since the mitzva of davening with a minyan is so precious, the prisoner shouldn’t delay the opportunity, but rather grab the first opportunity that he had.

Is it an obligation to daven with a minyan? The Shulchan Aruch used the word “ישתדל” (one should make an effort). This suggests that it is not an absolute obligation to daven with a minyan. However, if one davens with a tzibbur it is much more likely that their tefillot will be answered. Rav Moshe Feinstein⁶ writes that even a great and righteous person is not guaranteed that their prayers will be answered when davening alone. Therefore, one should make a real effort to do so.

The Mishnah Berurah⁷ writes that If one has a choice of attending one of two shuls – one should ideally pray at the larger one because of the principle of “ברב עם הדרת מלך” (the King’s glory is magnified when more people join together). However, if the larger shul is noisy and one will not hear the tefillot, it is better to daven in the quieter minyan. If the choice is between davening by yourself at shul or with a minyan at one’s home, one should rather daven with a minyan. The Radvaz writes that one can certainly choose the shul that matches their minhagim rather than attending a larger

¹ Orach Chaim Siman 90:9.

² Siman 90, seif katan 28.

³ Magen Avraham Orach Chaim 132:6 and Mishnah Berurah siman 128 seif katan 61.

⁴ Gemara Sotah 40a.

⁵ Rav David ben Solomon ibn Zimra (1479–1573) an early Acharon and author of more than 3,000 responsa.

⁶ או"ח ח"ב סי' כד

⁷ Seif katan 28.

shul which does not. Rav Moshe Feinstein writes that if the larger shul is far away, there is no problem with choosing to attend a shul that is closer.⁸

What if one cannot make it to shul to daven with a minyan? One should still try to attach themselves to the tzibbur in some way. For instance, one could daven at the same time as the tzibbur. The Gemara⁹ refers to this as a favourable time and the Shulchan Aruch also brings it as an option. Secondly, one can daven in the same place as the tzibbur davened. R' Yonah writes in the name of the Geonim that it is still preferable to daven in a shul (i.e. even without a minyan) rather than somewhere else, because a shul is a place that is set aside and fixed for communal prayer. The Shulchan Aruch brings this as another option. From the order as set out in the Shulchan Aruch, it seems that if one has a choice to daven at either the right time or the right place, it is preferable to choose to daven at the right time.

The Shulchan Aruch discusses one who is נגזר (forced) that is, one cannot attend shul due to circumstances beyond their control. This can be difficult to delineate. Certainly, being ill would qualify. The Magen Avraham explains that someone who is feeling weak is also considered 'forced', and one does not need to be really sick or bed-ridden. The Mishnah Berurah discusses financial issues. He writes that one can daven at home in order to avoid a financial loss, but not in order to simply avoid losing out on a profit. Of course one should check with their local Orthodox Rabbi as to what circumstances would justify missing a minyan. If one cannot make it to shul, it is good to try to gather a minyan in their home. This would be preferable to just davening by oneself at the time of the communal tefillah. However, the Magen Avraham acknowledges that some are reluctant to trouble people to come to their house. Note that Rav Nevenzah writes that if one has less than a minyan, it is still good to daven together with others because there is still benefit in joining with others to pray.

Chazarat Hashatz – the repetition of the Amidah (Shemoneh Esreh)

How should we behave during the Chazan's repetition? Of course one shouldn't talk during the chazan's repetition. In fact, the sin of talking during chazarat hashatz is so severe that some poskim write that 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!¹⁰ (One should check with their Rabbi before relying on this to stay home from shul!)

The Shulchan Aruch¹¹ rules that the tzibbur should answer 'Amen' to each bracha of the chazan and have in mind when answering Amen that what was said in the bracha is true. The Mishnah Berurah¹² adds that one should have in mind when he answers 'Amen' the meaning of the words that conclude the bracha.

The Shelah HaKadosh¹³ writes that he noticed many "chareidim l'dvar Hashem" (those who are meticulous in following the will of Hashem) who would participate with the repetition of the Shemoneh Esreh. They would place their siddur in front of them during the repetition, looking inside with their eyes and their hearts, and refuse to allow anything to distract them, as they followed along word for word. This is a great technique that we can all try. It is a simple step (although difficult to put into practice) to achieve greatness in prayer. Pointing to the words with your finger can help to maintain concentration. The Arizal had a different custom. He wouldn't look in his siddur but would instead close his eyes and focus his mind, listening carefully to every word recited. The Kaf Hachaim brought both opinions and said that each person should do what best helps him concentrate.

Someone asked Rav Elyashiv whether it was preferable to stand for the repetition of the Amidah or while the Aron Hakodesh was opened and he was surprised by the response. While it is important to stand while the Aron is open, it is more important to stand during the repetition of the Amidah. Rav Elyashiv added an important point. It is also preferable to sit rather than to walk around. Standing in one's place, or even sitting, is halachically considered שומע כעונה (i.e., if one pays attention to the words of the Chazan, it is as if he said the words himself). However, one who walks around during the repetition of the Amidah does not fall into this category.¹⁴

Let's try something this week:

1. Remember - the main reason we daven with a minyan is to pray Shemoneh Esreh with the tzibbur. Make every effort to be at shul for the Shemoneh Esreh.
2. Try to act appropriately during the chazan's repetition by following the steps brought above.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

⁸ Although on the other hand, there is the concept of שכר הליכה – getting reward for the extra effort of walking a further distance to shul.

⁹ Brachot 7b.

¹⁰ פסקי תשובות אות ז

¹¹ Orach Chaim 124:6.

¹² Seif katan 24.

¹³ The following is taken from Mishna Berura Digest

(https://www.mishnaberurayomi.org/pdf_digest/Chelek_1/0274_Siman_124_Seif_4-5.pdf)

¹⁴ תפילה כהלכתה, פי"ג, הערה ע"ח