

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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

Parashat Devarim – The real power of heartfelt prayer

This week we start sefer Devarim, which contains Moshe's final teachings to Bnei Yisrael before his death. Moshe summarises the past 40 years of Bnei Yisrael's wanderings in the Midbar, highlighting key events and the important lessons that need to be learnt. This includes the debacle of the Meraglim which delayed entry into the Land, precipitating the 40 years of wandering.

After describing the ill-fated mission of the Spies, and Hashem's decree that that generation would not merit entering the Land, Moshe described the people's response. They admitted they had sinned, and they planned to go up and fight the inhabitants of the Land "according to all that Hashem our G-d has commanded us". Moshe warned the people that it was too late, and they would not be successful. Unfortunately, the people ignored Moshe's advice. They went out to battle but Hashem was not with them, and they suffered a crushing defeat. The people were devastated. Moshe describes what happened next:

"So you returned and wept before Hashem. But Hashem did not listen to your voice, and he did not pay attention to you. And you dwelt in Kadesh many days" (Devarim 1:45-46)

Bnei Yisrael desperately wanted to enter the land. But Hashem didn't grant them their wish. They had sinned and they had to be punished. But what is the relevance of the next pasuk that states they dwelt in Kadesh for many days.¹ The Netziv² points out that even though Hashem did not "listen" to the Jewish people in that he didn't grant them entry as per their request, he did have compassion and allow them to stay in one place for a very long time. Though they were destined to wander throughout the desert for 40 years, He allowed them to rest in Kadesh for 19 years! Those of us who have emigrated, or have moved around from place to place, can appreciate how unsettling this can be. To be able to spend an extended time in one place, and catch our breath, is therefore a huge blessing.

The Netziv adds that these two pasukim teach us the interesting and powerful nature of prayer. Even though the specific request that Bnei Yisrael asked for was not granted, their prayers (weeping before Hashem) still had an enormous effect. Future generations can learn from this event not to despair if their prayers are unanswered, we should realise that our prayers have enormous benefit, even though things may not work out the way we wanted.

Let's consider the following:

Reuven was always struggling financially. He had a dead-end job with no hope of progression, and every month was a challenge to make ends meet. He had a two-pronged approach to deal with his problem. He did hishtadlut, always looking out for a better job, trying to work overtime whenever possible and trying to minimise his expenses. He also davened, begging Hashem three times a day for an end to his suffering. But the harder he tried, and the more he davened, the deeper he sunk into debt. He became quite down, constantly lamenting his misfortune. But then he had some good news. His oldest daughter, after a number of years looking, finally found a good shidduch. He was a lovely boy from a great family, and she

¹ I saw this idea in the "Short Vort", by Rabbi Moshe Kormornick for Parashat Devarim.

² Rav Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin (1816 – 1893), Rosh yeshiva of the Volozhin Yeshiva.

seemed so happy. And then his wife was involved a nasty car accident but thank G-d nobody was hurt. He started focusing on the things that were going well in his life. It was a very hot summer and for the first time in years his air conditioning didn't break down. He started to take pleasure in even the little things in life. He had a tough day at work, but on the way home he bumped into an old friend that he hadn't seen in years and had a wonderful time catching up. If he hadn't stayed back late at work, he would have missed him totally. Reuven was still struggling financially, and he was still davening and making efforts to change his fortune. But he found that when he looked for it, he could count numerous blessings that Hashem had granted him. And surely his heartfelt davening had opened the doors to such bracha, even if it was not exactly what he had asked for.

In the Amidah, when we recite Modim, the kavana that we should have is that we are thanking Hashem for answering our prayers. We should imagine that we have just asked a king for our deepest personal requests, and he said "Yes!" If we were to receive such a response, we would naturally say thank you with all of our heart. But what if our specific prayer was not answered? How can we keep saying 'thank you', prayer after prayer, day after day, year after year, if we didn't yet receive specifically what we asked for?

Perhaps the Netziv's lesson above can be applied here. As the Netziv teaches, we have to learn not to despair if our wishes are not granted and to remember that our prayers still have an enormous effect. And we should say thank you for that effect, even when our specific request is denied.

Imagine that you asked a king for a million dollars to pay off your debts. The king responded: "I'm sorry my child, I won't give you a million dollars now. You don't understand why, but trust me, it is not in your best interests right now. But your prayers are precious to me. A close family member of yours was destined to receive great suffering, but your prayers have succeeded in nullifying that decree". Wouldn't you say appreciate this kindness from the bottom of your heart?

We don't truly appreciate the power of our prayers. We often don't see the effects of our heartfelt requests to Hashem. But we should know that our prayers are powerful. The very act of praying to Hashem is an act of faith, acknowledging Him as the source of everything. And this act of faith is a fundamental mitzva which is sure to be rewarded. It may not grant us exactly what we are focused on asking for, but it is surely having a real effect.

Perhaps that is the meaning of the phrase at the end of the Modim prayer that we recite personally while the Chazan is repeating the Shemoneh Esreh. "(We thank You) for inspiring us to thank You."³ We are grateful to Hashem and we thank Him, purely for the privilege of being able to talk to Him and the opportunity that we have to thank Him.

Hashem doesn't ignore us, but rather responds to our prayers by giving us the best outcome for us at the perfect time. We must not stop requesting our needs from the only address that can provide us with what is truly for the best.

Let's try something this week:

1. Before saying Modim, pause and think about the Netziv's lesson – our prayers have a powerful effect, even if we don't always see the results we specifically prayed for.
2. When reciting Modim, imagine that you have submitted your request to Hashem, and as a direct result of that request, Hashem will grant you a huge salvation. Then say thank you like you really mean it!

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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³ Translation taken from the Artscroll siddur.