

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Va'etchanan
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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Parashat Va'etchanan – the importance of prayer

This week's Parsha, Va'etchanan, opens with Moshe telling Bnei Yisrael about his prayers begging Hashem to allow him to enter the land of Israel. The Midrash tells us that Moshe davened to Hashem 515 times requesting permission to enter the land. (The gematria (numerical value) of the word 'Va'etchanan' is 515).

Moshe knew the correct direction to channel his request. To Hashem, via prayer. It so happened that in this case the answer was 'No'.

Rabbi Lawrence Keleman tells an amazing story about his book, "To Kindle a Soul". This book is a manual on how to raise children, based on the teachings of Rav Shlomo Wolbe¹. Rabbi Keleman describes three pillars of child raising – planting, building and prayer. He brings modern day research as support for this theory.

Planting involves teaching children values and principles. Just like planting crops, this is a slow process. First we plant a seed and then we wait. Eventually the shoot will break through the ground and the plant will grow. Similarly, we teach ideas to children and we wait for those ideas to take root and grow.

Building involves moulding behaviour. Just like building a house, this is an active process and the results can often be seen straight away. The builder lays a brick and the brick is there for all to see. Similarly, through various techniques such as positive reinforcement, punishment, consequences etc we teach children what behaviour is appropriate and what behaviour is inappropriate.

Prayer is the third pillar. We need to put in effort, but our success (or lack thereof) is up to Hashem. We need to pray to Hashem that our efforts will bear fruit.

Rabbi Keleman was flying to the US for his book launch. He had a number of interviews set up with the major TV networks. His publicist was very excited because the book was set to be a best seller. The publicist loved the idea of planting and building but he was a bit concerned about the third pillar. The publicist requested that Rabbi Keleman not mention prayer in his interviews because it was not a 'popular idea these days'. Rabbi Keleman was not comfortable with this suggestion because prayer is a fundamental component of the whole system.

As it turned out, the book launch took place soon after the '911' twin towers tragedy. In his first interview Rabbi Keleman spoke at length about planting and building. The interviewer then asked Rabbi Keleman about the third pillar. Rabbi Keleman asked the interviewer: "Are there people in this world that you don't want your children to meet? Are there incidents in this world that you don't want your children to be exposed to? How much control do you have over that?" The interviewer agreed that there are things in this world that we don't want our children exposed to and despite all our efforts we have very little control over them. Rabbi Keleman said "These

¹ 1914-2005, best known as the author of the mussar classic, Alei Shur.

days, if you don't pray for your children, you're insane!" With the events of 911 fresh in his mind, even the publicist enthusiastically agreed!

But what happens when our prayers are not answered? The following is a true story.²

Miriam was 6 years old. One day her favourite doll broke. She ran crying to her mother. Her mother tried her best to comfort Miriam. Eventually Miriam said "I know, I will daven to Hashem and he will fix the doll for me". Her mother said that was a wonderful idea. She was so pleased that Miriam thought by herself to turn to Hashem in times of need. But as soon as Miriam ran off to pray her mother regretted giving her approval. It was obvious what would happen. Miriam would daven to Hashem, the doll would not be miraculously fixed, and Miriam's faith would be crushed. Her mother didn't know what to do. After a few minutes she took a deep breath and walked into Miriam's room. She saw Miriam happily playing with another toy. She asked Miriam: "Did you ask Hashem to fix your doll?" Miriam said "Yes". "So what happened?" asked her mother. "He said 'No'" said Miriam. Then she continued happily playing with her new toy.

When Yoseph was living in Potiphar's house in Mitzrayim he was enormously successful in everything that he did. The Midrash tells us that Potiphar noticed Yoseph constantly muttering things under his breath. He assumed that Yoseph was reciting magic spells which was the reason for Yoseph's success. He asked Yoseph about it. Yoseph explained that before he did anything he would ask Hashem to allow that act to be successful. And after Yoseph completed something he would thank Hashem for allowing it to be successful. As well as being an enormous Kiddush Hashem, this demonstrated that Yoseph, like Moshe, knew the correct address to turn to with his requests.

It's not easy to treat each other with respect and interact in a peaceful and pleasant manner. It involves working very hard to understand where the other person is coming from and what they need at that moment. It's often hard enough to understand ourselves and where we are coming from! The only way we will have any hope of succeeding in our interpersonal relationships (and life in general) is with Hashem's help. So let's turn to Hashem and ask him for his help.

Here are some examples:

- Please Hashem, help me to think of the right words to use when I am having a difficult conversation with my work colleague.
- Please Hashem help me to treat my spouse in the way that s/he wants to be treated.
- Please Hashem help me to have patience when I am helping my child and help me to give them my full attention.

Let's try something this week:

1. Before we interact with someone, turn to Hashem and ask him to help. Make the request detailed and relevant.
2. When we finish interacting successfully with someone, say thank you to Hashem.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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² Name has been changed.