

## DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

### “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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

### Parashat Yitro – From the mountain to the people

In this week's Parasha of Yitro, we read about the Divine Revelation at Har Sinai – the only time in the entire history of the world when Hashem appeared to an entire nation. Let's examine the events leading up to the Revelation.

Moshe received important instructions from Hashem on the mountain regarding the upcoming Revelation. He was to instruct Bnei Yisrael about what they needed to do. They had three days to prepare themselves for the event, including setting up boundaries around Har Sinai to ensure that no-one came too close. Moshe shuttled between Hashem and the people, ferrying the instructions and the responses. Of course, Moshe didn't really need to report back to Hashem because Hashem already knew the people's response. But we learn from Moshe's conduct that it is derech erez (proper conduct) to report back to someone, even if the person already knows the information.<sup>1</sup>

On his final descent from the mountain before the Revelation, the pasuk states as follows:

*Moshe descended from the mountain to the people. He sanctified the people, and they washed their clothing. He said to the people, "Be ready for a three-day period..."*  
(Shmot 19:14-15)

The Torah doesn't include any superfluous words. Every single letter is there for a reason. If something seems superfluous, then there is something we can learn from it. The phrase "Moshe descended from the mountain *to the people*" seems superfluous. Immediately after Moshe descended from the mountain, the Torah tells us clearly that Moshe sanctified the people and gave them instructions. So it is clear that after Moshe descended from the mountain he went to the people. Where else would he be going?

The Midrash<sup>2</sup> notices this apparent superfluity and provides us with the answer:

*This teaches us that Moshe did not attend to his own business or go home first, rather, he went straight from the mountain to the people.*

The Midrash then goes on to prove that this was not an isolated occurrence. Every time Moshe came down from the mountain, or received instructions from Hashem, he went straight to the people, without focusing on his own needs at all.

This ability to focus on the needs of others, ahead of one's own needs, is a hallmark of great people. Consider the following remarkable story about Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach.

*It was the middle of the night, and Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach was at the hospital. He had just received the heartbreaking news that his wife of 54 years, Rebbetzin Chaya Rivka had passed away. He was alone in the hospital corridor, trying to digest the terrible news. Suddenly, one of his students from Yeshivat Kol Torah ran up to him. His wife had just given birth to their first child, and he was delighted to see the venerable Rosh Yeshiva right there at the hospital. He couldn't wait to share his good news. Rav Auerbach greeted his student warmly with his trademark smile and he gave him a beautiful bracha. The student departed exuberantly. He had no idea about Rav Auerbach's recent loss. In his excitement, he didn't stop to ask himself why the Rosh Yeshiva would be standing by himself in the hospital in the middle of the night.*

This is a touching example of Rav Auerbach's greatness. The needs of other people were always paramount. Rav Auerbach's personal needs were irrelevant.

<sup>1</sup> Rashi to Shmot 19:8, based on the Mechilta.

<sup>2</sup> The Mechilta, as quoted by Rashi to Shmot 19:14.

While reaching such a level may be unrealistic for most of us, we can certainly try to emulate such selflessness. For most of us, our personal needs are all-consuming. If we have a need or a desire, it becomes our focus. We need to train ourselves such that our personal needs do not have to always be met immediately. The following practical training exercise, based on Yesod HaTeshuva (The Foundation of Repentance) by Rabbeinu Yonah may assist in this regard:<sup>3</sup>

*"So said Rabbi Avraham ben David [the Ra'avad], who was one of the most devout people in the world. 'The greatest, finest, and most wondrous barrier [to sin] is to refrain from foods.' This is how he explained his words, 'Let one not refrain completely from eating meat or drinking wine, for what the Torah prohibited is enough. Rather, while one is eating and still desires to eat, let him – in honour of the Creator – set aside some of his desires, and not eat according to his appetite. This method will prevent him from sinning, and remind him more than a weekly fast to love the Creator, for this is every day, continuously, whenever he eats and whenever he drinks, to set aside part of his desire in honour of the Creator.'"*

This is known as 'Taanit Ra'avad' (the fast of the Ra'avad). Instead of a full fast, one just leaves over the last mouthful of food on the plate, in order to work on one's character traits. This small, consistent act performed over time can help someone to improve their middot and start to rule over their desires. This is not as easy as it sounds (especially for some of us). If one feels that this is too difficult to do regularly, then one could choose a few meals each week to undertake this practice. However, one should not do this on Shabbat or Yom Tov. If one wants an extra challenge and a higher degree of difficulty, one can try to leave over the best mouthful of the food, the bite one is most looking forward to. Warning – this is not for the fainthearted!

The question arises – is this considered baal tashchit (the prohibition against wasting food and other items)? The poskim answer that as long as one is doing this for a positive purpose of working on one's character traits, it is not a problem of baal tashchit.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, there are times when we need to take care of our own needs in order to help others. For example, it is difficult to be a good parent if we are hungry and sleep deprived. If we want to be effective at helping others, we do have to make sure that our basic needs are being met. But we need to be honest with ourselves – are we taking care of our needs (and desires) because we want to be the best that we can be? Or because we enjoy it?

In addition, there are other mitzvot that can help us to work on this middah. For example, if we have an animal that relies on us for food, there is a requirement to feed the animal before we ourselves eat. The extent of this requirement can be seen in the following halacha.<sup>5</sup> One is normally forbidden to speak between reciting a bracha and eating the food. If one does speak, he must repeat the bracha, unless the speech related to the meal. For example, if one made a bracha on bread and then realised that he did not have a knife or some salt, he is permitted to ask for it, and that is not considered an interruption. Similarly, if after making a bracha one remembered that they did not yet feed their animal, one is permitted to instruct someone to feed the animal. This is not considered an interruption because one must not eat before feeding their animal, and therefore such speech is related to the meal. For those of us that own pets, this is another opportunity to practice considering the needs of others before we focus on our own needs.<sup>6</sup>

Although it may appear petty, or even irrelevant at first, these small, regular acts of restraining ourselves from fully fulfilling our desires can train us over time to think less about our own needs and consequently more about the needs of others. In this way we can try our best to emulate our great leaders, like Moshe Rabbeinu, who ignored his own needs and went straight from the mountain to the people.

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to take on the above Taanit Ra'avad for a period of time. Set yourself a goal (such as one meal a day, six days a week for the next three weeks) and try to stick to it!
2. Look for other areas where you can train yourself to think about the needs of others before your own.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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<sup>3</sup> Yesod HaTeshuva is usually printed in the Rosh Hashana machzor. See page 11 in the Artscroll Ashkenaz machzor.

<sup>4</sup> See for example <https://dinonline.org/2011/05/31/leaving-food-on-plate/>

<sup>5</sup> Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 167:6.

<sup>6</sup> One should check the parameters of this halacha with their local Orthodox Rabbi.