

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Tetzaveh
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darchai.noam@gmail.com
www.darchai-noam.com

How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Tetzaveh – Master a new skill quickly!

This week’s Parasha of Tetzaveh discusses the manufacture of the priestly garments that were to be worn by the Kohanim while serving in the Mishkan.

All Kohanim wore a full-length tunic, linen pants, a linen turban and a long sash wound above the waist. In addition, the Kohen Gadol wore the efod (an apron-like garment made of dyed wool, linen and gold thread), the choshen (a breastplate containing precious stones), the meil (a cloak of blue wool with golden bells and decorative pomegranates on its hem) and the tzitz (a golden plate worn on the forehead with the inscription “Holy to Hashem”).

The pasukim describe in detail the beautiful and ornate work that was performed by Bnei Yisrael in making these holy items. We see terms such as “a jeweller’s craft”¹ and “the work of a master weaver”². We already learnt of this fine craftsmanship in last week’s Parasha, when we read about the construction of the Mishkan itself. It appears that members of Bnei Yisrael were experts at many crafts, including carpentry, metal work, engraving and embroidery.

The Gemara³ teaches us that Bnei Yisrael even invented new techniques for manufacturing items of superior quality for the Mishkan. The Gemara is discussing the parameters of various melachot that are forbidden on Shabbat. In order to be forbidden on a Torah level, the melacha must be performed in the usual way that such a melacha is performed.⁴ If it is performed in an unusual manner, it is still forbidden, but only on a Rabbinic level.

The Gemara discusses the way that the women of Bnei Yisrael spun goat hair when manufacturing materials for the Mishkan. The Gemara notes that the women were somehow able to spin the goat hair while it was still attached to the animal. The Sforno⁵ explains that when items are detached from their source of growth, they often begin to deteriorate. Through this technique, the women ensured that the goat hair retained more of its natural lustre. The Gemara concludes that the women exhibited extraordinary wisdom. Typical people are not able to perform such a feat and therefore it is not considered the ‘usual manner of spinning wool’.

A question arises – from where did Bnei Yisrael learn such skills? They had been slaves who spent all day doing back-breaking menial labour! When could they possibly have been trained to become expert artisans? Clearly, they were assisted by Hashem!

There are two very important lessons that we can learn from this:

Firstly, if something is important to you, and if you really put your heart into it, you will be amazed at what you can accomplish. The Jewish people were excited to be involved in building the Mishkan as instructed by Hashem. They just stepped forward and volunteered their services without thinking about their experience and skill set. They threw themselves into the work and they probably surprised themselves at what they were able to achieve.

¹ Shmot 28:11.

² Shmot 28:15.

³ Shabbat 74b.

⁴ Needless to say, this is not a licence to perform forbidden melacha on Shabbat by just performing the melacha in an unusual manner. In some circumstances there may be certain leniencies that apply, but a Rabbi should be consulted.

⁵ In his comment to Shmot 35:26. The Meshech Chochmah gives a different explanation – the women wanted to participate but when they were niddah they were temaiah. The work for the Mishkan had to be done in tahara. While attached to the living animals the hair was not subject to tumah.

We can also learn that if you do something for the right reason, for Hashem, then you will often receive Divine assistance. Hashem commanded Bnei Yisrael to build the Mishkan and they tried their best to do so, simply because Hashem told them to. Their strong will and passion opened up the channels for Hashem to help them succeed. As the well-known Midrash⁶ says: “Open up for me an opening like the eye of a needle and in turn I will enlarge it to be an opening through which wagons can enter”.

Rabbi Akiva Tatz points out a fascinating insight derived from the words of the Nishmat Kol Chai prayer which we recite in Shacharit on Shabbat and Yom Tov.⁷ The prayer sets out at length how impossible it is for us to adequately praise Hashem. Even if “our mouths were as full of song as the sea”, “our lips as full of praise as the breadth of the sea”, “our hands as outspread as eagles of the sky and our feet as swift as deer” we could still not thank Hashem sufficiently. After making it abundantly clear that we cannot praise Hashem adequately, the prayer then continues: “Therefore, the organs that You placed within us, and the spirit and soul that You breathed into our nostrils, and the tongue that you placed into our mouth – all of them shall thank and bless, praise and glorify...”. The word ‘therefore’ seems out of place. It would make more sense to say: “Despite the fact that this is impossible we are going to try anyway”. But the words are essentially saying that because it is impossible to sufficiently praise Hashem, we are going to do so!

Rabbi Tatz teaches that this prayer contains within it a powerful lesson about hishtadlut and emunah. Hashem is in charge of every outcome. We just have to put in the effort, even if we feel that achieving our goal is impossible. We don’t need to concern ourselves with whether something is achievable or realistic, because we believe with perfect faith that Hashem will make it happen if it is His will. Our job is simply to decide what is right, and then just do it. Instead of asking “Do I have the ability to do this?”, the only relevant question that we should ask is “Is this what Hashem wants me to do right now?”

The story of Rabbi Noach Weinberg, the founder of Aish HaTorah highlights the extra level of Divine assistance that is available to us when we act lishmah (for the sake of Shamayim). Rabbi Noach Weinberg had a dream of creating an army of kiruv activists. Aish HaTorah was his fifth attempt at creating a kiruv Yeshiva. After his fourth attempt, he didn’t consider himself a failure and give up. He knew that he was working for Hashem, and he just tried again. And he succeeded in a remarkable manner. Rabbi Weinberg had a goal that his powerful Discovery Seminar would reach half a million people. Many years later someone mentioned to him that the goal was unrealistic. But Rav Noach responded that if they hadn’t aimed for 500,000 they wouldn’t have reached the tens of thousands of Jews that they did. And now, years after he passed away, the Discovery Seminar has reached 200,000 participants.

The following story highlights the fact that when we act lishmah, we can receive Divine assistance and protection.

A story is told about Rav Yisroel Salanter.⁸ Towards the end of his life, Rav Salanter would travel around Europe, visiting communities that needed chizuk. At one point he was in Paris doing whatever he could to strengthen the Jewish community. It was the middle of winter, and the roads were full of ice. Rav Salanter slipped and fell quite badly, rolling down a flight of stairs. However, he was not hurt at all. He merely stood up, dusted himself off, and continued on his way. Later he explained that the sole reason he was in Paris was for the sake of serving Hashem and helping the local Jewish community. There was no trace of personal interest whatsoever. Therefore, he was confident that Hashem would protect him and nothing bad would happen to him while in Paris.

We may not be on the level of the righteous women in the Midbar, Rav Salanter or Rav Weinberg, but if we decide to do something for Hashem, we can also tap in to that Divine assistance that is on offer. We are capable of anything if Hashem wills it. And if we align our will with Hashem’s will, then anything is possible.

Let’s try something this week:

1. Try to contemplate how much we do for selfish reasons and how much we do for altruistic reasons.
2. Try to take on something new, just for Hashem.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁶ Midrash Raba Shir HaShirim 5:2.

⁷ This tefillah appears at the end of Pesukai D’zimrah. See page 400 of the standard Artscroll Ashkenaz siddur. There is a fascinating controversy about the authorship of this tefilla. For those who are interested, you can find more details here: <https://www.yeshiva.co/ask/57950> and here: <https://www.oztorah.com/2021/12/did-peter-the-apostle-author-nishmat-ask-the-rabbi/>.

⁸ 1809-1883, the founder of the mussar movement.