

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Re'eh
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Re'eh – Using our experiences to help us to serve Hashem

In this week's Parsha Moshe teaches a number of mitzvot, many of which are specifically related to the land of Israel. One of these is the obligation to treat a Jewish bondsman with humanity.¹ When sending a bondsman away free one must provide him with generous gifts. Moshe explains:

“You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and Hashem your G-d redeemed you; therefore I command you regarding this matter today.”
(Devarim 15:15)

Reminding Bnei Yisrael that they themselves were slaves in Egypt will inspire them to act in a more humane manner when dealing with their own slaves. The things that we experience and are exposed to can help us to empathise with those around us, step into their shoes and see things from their perspective.

In addition, we can use our experiences to improve and strengthen our Divine service.

6:12am, Monday 31 July 2017, Erev Tisha B'Av: I'm walking to my local shul. Though half-asleep, I cannot help noticing the torrent of water gushing down the road, an unusual sight in the middle of an Israeli summer. As I get closer to shul, I see police cars and emergency vehicles. And when I arrive at my destination, I am confronted with a burnt-out shell of a building, an acrid smell and lots of smoke.²

5:00pm, Wednesday 2 August 2017, the day after Tisha B'Av: The local community has gathered at a ceremony just outside the 'burnt shul'. Three Torah scrolls were burnt. Two brothers had dedicated one of those Torah scrolls in memory of their late father. Today they will be burying that Torah scroll next to where their father is buried. The two chief Rabbis of Israel speak to a community that is still numb, giving words of chizuk and comfort. In the background the emergency workers are rummaging through the ruins, trying to salvage any precious remains.

6:11am, Friday 4 August 2017: I am driving past the site of my old shul, on my way to another shul to catch Shacharit. Instead of the burnt-out shell, I now see an empty plot of land. The destroyed building has been removed. It is hard to know what is more confronting – seeing the burnt-out shell of a shul or seeing just an empty plot of land where a shul used to stand.

When we mourn on Tisha B'Av it is often very difficult to stir up the requisite passion in our sadness. By recalling a more recent tragic event such as a fire in a shul we may be able to

¹ Devarim 15:12-15.

² Video footage of the fire can be seen here: <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/233191> (Warning: some of the images are quite graphic).

inspire and incite more kavana. There is nothing like watching your own shul burn to the ground on Erev Tisha B'Av to focus the heart and remind us of what we are mourning for!

The Piazečne Rebbe³ in his 'Bnei Machshava Tova' explains this concept by means of a parable:

A teenager was falsely accused of a crime and was thrown into prison pending his trial. The jail-keeper was a real brute. He would only allow the boy's father into the prison cell if the father had important information to discuss with his son relating to the upcoming trial. How would a foolish father act in these circumstances? When he had information to discuss with his son, he would gain entrance to the cell and speak to his son about the relevant issues. How would a wise father act? Whenever he gained entrance to the cell, he would take the opportunity to hug his son and tell him how much he missed him and loved him. It didn't matter why or how the father got access to his son's cell. Once he was in the cell, he would take advantage of the opportunity.

It can be difficult for us to access our soul's emotions in the way that Hashem wants us to. We are often distracted by events that we encounter in the physical world. The Piazečne Rebbe is teaching us that we can seize any opportunity where our heart is open. Like the wise father in the parable, it doesn't matter how we entered into the prison cell. Once we are in (that is, once our heart is engaged), we can take the opportunity to direct our emotions to empathise with others and to serve Hashem. For example:

- Recalling the numerous periods in history when the Jewish people were 'strangers in a strange land' may inspire us to be kinder to new immigrants, and even to those who move house.
- Recalling your excitement and nervous anticipation at the beginning of a school year can help you empathise with your children when they start a new year.
- If your team wins the grand final, try to harness some of that excitement to show gratitude to Hashem for all of the good that He has given you.
- When we are feeling anxious or concerned about something, use those emotions to recite some Tehillim, turn to Hashem and beseech Him for assistance.

We constantly face numerous events in our daily lives. Events that stir up our emotions such as excitement, anxiety or fear. Let's try to use our experiences and memories of emotional events to inspire us in our interactions with other people and to help us in our Divine service.

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to be aware of when our emotions are stirred and use these opportunities to work on our relationship with Hashem and improve our Divine service.
2. When trying to empathise with another, we can conjure up a memory of a similar emotional incident that we experienced to help us to invoke our compassion.
3. If we are trying to maximise our kavana in our davening, we can tap into our stored experiences and emotions to help us.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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³ Rebbe Kalonymus Kalman Shapira (1889–1943)