

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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

Parashat Shemini – Preparing for tefillah

This week we read Parashat Shemini which continues to deal with the use of the Mishkan as well as the death of Nadav and Avihu and the laws of kashrut. We will continue with our series on tefillah, which replaces the offering of korbanot today.

This week we will focus on some of the laws relating to preparations for tefillah. But first, let's look at an inspirational passage about tefillah from the Kuzari.¹

The Kuzari presents a dialogue between the ruler of the Khazar kingdom and a Jewish sage. As part of the king's quest to discover the true religion, he interviews the sage and the 'scholars' of other religions.² This is how the sage describes tefillah to the king:

- *“He does not recite his prayers by rote, unthinkingly, like a mynah or parrot. Rather each word is accompanied by the proper thought and intent”*

Most of us struggle to achieve this. Even when we make a conscious effort to focus on our words of tefillah, it usually takes a matter of seconds until our mind has started wandering!

- *“This segment of time [which he devotes to prayer] is the most excellent and choicest of times. He views all other moments of life as pathways leading to his moment. He anticipates the moment's arrival, for during it he resembles spiritual beings and is divested of the physical.”*

Is this person doing the same davening that we do?!? Wouldn't it be amazing if our tefillah was so powerful!

- *“The cream of his day and night are the three times of prayer...this order of prayer nurtures his soul as food nourishes the body – he prays to sustain his soul just as he eats to sustain his body. The spiritual blessing that he gleans from prayer stays with him until the next prayer service, just as the sustenance from one's daytime meal lingers until he eats at night. The longer his soul goes without prayer, the more it is darkened by the influence of world affairs.”*

Now here is something that we can relate to. Food. We understand the pleasure that we get from food. We know what it means to look forward to a special meal. Food gives us energy, makes us feel good and it can taste great. The Kuzari is teaching us that the relationship between food and the body is the same as the relationship between tefillah and the soul.

Isn't it interesting that many years ago people usually ate only two meals a day. The idea of eating three meals a day is of more recent origin (probably related to the industrial revolution when working and eating habits changed). Perhaps we could say that we are less hardy than we used to be hundreds of years ago, and we now need three meals to sustain us throughout the day. There was also a shift from two tefillot to three tefillot per day. The third daily tefillah – Maariv – used to be voluntary, but at some point in our history it became compulsory. We could suggest that these days we need the spiritual nourishment of three tefillot to make it through the day, just like we need three meals. We can take the analogy even further. These days we usually eat more than just three meals a day, we also like to snack between meals. We can apply the same idea to the spiritual world. We can turn to Hashem in private tefillah throughout the day and give our neshama a 'snack' whenever we want. We don't have to wait until the next formal prayer service to do so.³

¹ Section 3.5.7. The Kuzari is a classic book of Jewish philosophy written by Rabbi Yehuda Halevi in 1140. The translations are taken from pages 270-1 of the Feldheim edition.

² Whether or not this is based on a real event is the subject of dispute amongst historians, but Rabbi Yehuda Halevi's book contains a treasure trove of theology, philosophy and ideology in the dialogues between the king and the sage.

³ I saw this idea of 'spiritual snacking' in "Nefesh Shimshon, Shabbos Kodosh" by Rav Shimshon Dovid Pincus.

Preparing your hands for tefillah

The Shulchan Aruch⁴ rules that one must wash his hands with water before praying⁵. If you do not have convenient access to water, and are concerned that if you search for water you will miss the time for tefillah or will miss davening with a minyan,⁶ then it is sufficient to wipe your hands on something that will clean them.

The Mishnah Berurah⁷ quotes the Rambam who is very strict about this requirement. According to the Rambam, if one was required to wash his hands for tefillah but did not do so and did not even wipe his hands on a surface that would clean his hands, his tefillah is invalid and he would have to daven again! The halacha does not follow the Rambam in this matter, but we should still be stringent in accordance with the Rambam's position.⁸ One should wash their hands with a utensil and the water should be poured over the entire hand (both the palm and the back of the hand) until the wrist. At the very least one should wash the entire fingers until the knuckles.⁹

Why do we need to wash our hands before tefillah? As well as for cleanliness, the Chayai Adam¹⁰ explains that we wash our hands because our prayer is in place of korbanot. A kohen who is about to commence his service in the Bet Hamikdash is required to wash. Therefore we must also sanctify ourselves, just like a kohen.

When we wash our hands, it is preferable to use a vessel rather than just putting our hands under the tap. In this way, the water is poured by 'koach gavra' (human effort). We can learn an important lesson here. When we want to purify ourselves, we need to be actively involved. We can't just sit back passively and let it happen. However, we can allow someone else to wash our hands for us (like the Leviim wash the hands of the Kohanim before Birkat Kohanim). This teaches us that we don't have to take sole responsibility for purifying ourselves. We can get help from others. But only a person who has clean hands themselves should wash our hands.¹¹ This teaches us that we need to be careful about who we allow to help us.

Preparing your body for tefillah

The pasuk in Amos states: *"Prepare yourself to meet your G-d, O Israel"* (4:12).

The Gemara (Brachot 23a) explains: *"Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani said in the name of Rabbi Yonatan: One who needs to relieve himself may not pray, based on the pasuk: "Prepare to greet your G-d, O Israel", and one must clear his mind of all distractions to prepare to receive G-d during prayer."*

The Shulchan Aruch¹² rules that if one feels the urge to relieve himself, he may not daven. And if he did daven, his tefillah is considered an abomination and in some cases, he would need to daven again.¹³ Initially, one should not daven until he has first checked whether he needs to relieve himself.

Iyun tefilla (concentrating on our prayers) is one of the precepts for which we are rewarded in this world and in the world to come¹⁴. So it is certainly an area that is worth investing our time and effort. Let's try something this week:

1. Remember the powerful lesson from the Kuzari – each tefillah should be, and can be, like a meal for our soul.
2. When we stand to pray, we are like a kohen conducting his Divine Service in the Bet Hamikdash! Prepare yourself before davening – go to the bathroom if necessary and wash your hands as required.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁴ Orach Chaim 92:4.

⁵ If one knows for certain that his hands remained clean since the last time he washed them, and he did not divert his attention, then he would not have to wash his hands again.

⁶ Mishnah Berurah (seif katan 20) based on the Bach.

⁷ Seif katan 13.

⁸ פסקי תשובות אות ז

⁹ Mishnah Berurah, siman 4, seif katan 57.

¹⁰ By Rabbi Avraham Danzig (1748–1820) (כלל ז ס"ה)

¹¹ See Gemara Brachot Daf 51a.

¹² Orach Chaim 92:1.

¹³ Generally, if one can restrain themselves for 72 minutes they would not need to daven again. One should check with their Rabbi for the practical application of this halacha and how to conduct themselves if they need to repeat their tefillah.

¹⁴ Gemara, Shabbat 127a. This is one of the passages that is recited every morning during Shacharit after the Brachot on the Torah. See page 16 of the standard Artscroll Ashkenaz siddur.