

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Matot Masei
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Matot Masei – Making Hashem’s will your will

In this week’s double Parasha of Matot Masei, we read about Hashem commanding Moshe to take vengeance against Midian for inciting Bnei Yisrael to sin. (We read about Midian’s behaviour at the end of Parashat Balak – they incited Bnei Yisrael to engage in immorality and idol worship. As a result of Midian’s evil plans, Bnei Yisrael had been struck with a plague in which 24,000 people died.) Hashem informed Moshe that after the war that would be fought against Midian, Moshe would then pass away.

“Hashem spoke to Moshe saying, ‘Take vengeance for Bnei Yisrael against the Midianites; afterwards you will be gathered to your people [i.e. die]’ (Bamidbar 31:1-2)

Hashem did not give Moshe a time limit in which to carry out this war against Midian. It would be understandable for a person who was told that they were to die after carrying out a task, to delay that task as long as possible. They would organise their affairs, take care of any unfinished business, and perhaps also take that world trip that they had not got around to yet! However, Moshe did not delay his Divinely instructed task for a moment. Straight after receiving Hashem’s command, Moshe immediately began preparing for the battle. He acted with zerizut (alacrity), fulfilling Hashem’s command with joy.¹

The Midrash² contrasts Moshe’s behaviour with that of his disciple Yehoshua. Hashem commanded Yehoshua to battle the 31 kings in Eretz Yisrael. Yehoshua understood prophetically that he would die after these wars were complete. Therefore, he delayed these battles. As a result, Hashem shortened Yehoshua’s life by 10 years. He lived until 110 years instead of 120 like Moshe.

Why did Yehoshua drag his feet? Certainly, his actions did not stem from a selfish place. Yehoshua understood that after his death, Bnei Yisrael would not have a strong leader and they would struggle in their service of Hashem. Yehoshua was acting altruistically, for the sake of his beloved people. Nevertheless, Hashem did not want him to delay and his decision to do so was punished, despite his admirable intentions.

The Tanach often describes the sins of Jewish leaders and other great people in our history. It is important to remember that when the greats committed a sin, it was only a sin at their level³. Had we been there at the time, we would not even be able to perceive that a sin was committed! Interestingly, many of these sins were caused by a very slight hint of ego. This caused the person to presume that they knew better than Hashem what was the right way to behave.

Some other examples include:

- Adam HaRishon – some commentators explain Adam’s thinking as follows: if he ate from the forbidden tree, it would become more difficult for Adam to serve Hashem. But, if he could overcome that more difficult challenge, it would result in an even greater service of Hashem.
- Nadav and Avihu thought that it was appropriate to bring an extra offering to Hashem in the newly built Mishkan, even though this sacrifice was not commanded by Hashem.
- David Hamelech asked Hashem to test him so that he could reach the level of the Avot – even though Hashem had not decided to test him.⁴

¹ Rashi to Bamidbar 31:3.

² Bamidbar Rabba 22:6.

³ Heard in a lecture by Rabbi Akiva Tatz: www.simpletoremember.com/media/a/sins-of-the-greats

⁴ See Sanhedrin 107a which discusses the sin of David and Batsheva and explains that David’s real sin in this incident was asking Hashem to test him. A proper explanation of this incident is beyond the scope of this article.

- Shlomo Hamelech married more wives than the Torah allowed (in particular the daughters of foreign kings) because he thought that he could thereby spread knowledge of Hashem throughout the world and thus improve the spiritual level of the entire world. The halacha specifically limits the number of wives that a king can marry. However, Shlomo believed that his wisdom would protect him from being led astray by his wives.

The Chovot Halevavot (Section 3 - "The Gate of Serving G-d") discusses ten levels in the service of Hashem, each level higher than the other. The ninth and second-highest level that the Chovot Halevavot describes is almost the ultimate level in Divine service. The only flaw of someone at this level is a lack of humility.⁵ The 'sins of the great' that we quoted above are perfect examples of this phenomenon – a great person whose only real flaw is a subtle lack of humility.

It may feel demoralising to know that such great people stumbled in this area of humility. What chance do we stand if such great tzaddikim stumbled? However, we need to remember that we are all judged at our own level. All we can do is try our best to follow Hashem's will and to not 'out-think' Hashem. The Mishnah in Pirkei Avot advises us to treat Hashem's will as if it were our will. In return, Hashem will treat our will as if it were His will. Furthermore, if we nullify our will before Hashem's will, then Hashem will nullify the will of others before our will.⁶

We have to work on constantly thinking about what Hashem would want us to do in any given situation. Sometimes it can be challenging to know what really is our will and to work out what is Hashem's will. What are our true motivations? It is often very difficult to discern what is truly driving our actions. It may require quiet contemplation to work out why we behave the way we do. Are we truly acting for Hashem or just for ourselves? Rabbi Dovid Nojowitz⁷ quotes the following joke:

A man was working very hard to refine his character traits. Once he woke up in the middle of the night feeling thirsty. He was about to get up and get a glass of water when it suddenly occurred to him that he would be giving in to his t'aiva (his desires). He decided to hold himself back and stay in bed. But then it occurred to him that by staying in bed he was demonstrating the negative middah of laziness! He wasn't sure what to do. Eventually he had a brilliant idea. He got out of bed, went to the kitchen, poured a glass of water and then poured it down the sink!

Rabbi Nojowitz quotes his mother's wise advice: this man shouldn't have thought so much. If he is thirsty, he should pour himself a glass of water, thank Hashem by saying a bracha and then enjoy the drink!⁸

From this Parasha we learn that we should try to emulate Moshe and run to do Hashem's will, even if it does not appear to be in our own self-interest. (Of course, everything that Hashem commands us to do is for our own best interest, but sometimes we do not see it at the time, or even in our lifetime). Our job is to just follow Hashem's will. In truth, in many cases it is actually clear what Hashem wants us to do. He has given us mitzvot to perform and we have a detailed Shulchan Aruch which tells us how to act. We just need to do our best to make Hashem's will our will, and to negate our ego in the process.

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to get into the habit of asking ourselves regularly – what does Hashem want me to do in this situation? Is a particular course of action what *Hashem* wants me to do, or what *I* want to do?
2. Once we have identified what Hashem wants us to do, we should try to run to do it, even if it is difficult (remember – the greater the difficulty, the greater the reward).
3. If you wake up in the middle of the night feeling thirsty, get up and get a glass of water. Just remember to say a bracha!

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁵ See Darchai Noam Vayikra 5776 for a more in-depth discussion of this idea.

⁶ Pirkei Avot 2:4.

⁷ National Director of Torah Umesorah (US) and previous Rosh Kollel of Kollel Bet HaTalmud in Melbourne.

⁸ If one who gets up from bed to drink during the night, it's preferable to wash Netilat Yadayim beforehand without a bracha. But if a person wakes up from thunder while in bed and wishes to say the bracha (שכחו וגבורתו מלא עולם), he does not need Netilat Yadayim. However, since he may have touched unclean places while sleeping he should quickly clean his hands by rubbing them on the sheet before reciting the bracha.