

## DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

### “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Ki Tavo  
September 2024 / Elul 5784

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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

### Ki Tavo – Approaching Rosh Hashanah

This week's Parsha, Ki Tavo, begins with the mitzva of the first fruits (bikkurim). The first fruits to ripen were treated in a special way. At the time that the Bet Hamikdash was standing, Bnei Yisrael were required to bring an offering of the first of their crops to the Kohanim. As the crops began to ripen, they would tie a ribbon around the first fruits to identify them. Every year, around Shavuot time, they would bring these first fruits to Jerusalem in a huge parade. They would hand over the baskets of first fruits to the Kohanim and recite certain pasukim about Yetziat Mitzrayim and praising and thanking Hashem for the Land of Israel.

“Firsts” or “beginnings” are also treated as more sanctified in other instances in the Torah. For example:

- the pidyon haben ceremony, which is only performed on a first-born son;
- the firstborn of certain animals was given as a gift to the Kohanim;
- terumah (gifts to the Kohanim) and tithes are first separated before we are permitted to eat our produce.

Most of these ‘firsts’ must be consumed in a particular way which accords with their sanctified status. For example, they may only be consumed:

- by particular people, such as the Kohanim;
- in a holy place - some of the gifts to the Kohanim must be consumed in the Bet Hamikdash, the second tithe (ma'aser shaini) must be consumed in Jerusalem;
- in a state of purity – for instance, the terumah must be pure and the Kohen that consumes the terumah must also be in a state of purity.

Rav Zev Leff explains that these various ‘firsts’ (the first of our crops, the first born of our flocks, the first shearing of our sheep etc.) are elevated and held up as an example. However, the rest of the crops do not retain such an elevated status. He compares this to our middot and behaviour. Though we often start our actions with the best of intentions, we often cannot remain at such an elevated level constantly. However, Rav Leff advises, it is still beneficial to ‘start out right’. If we start off in the right way, we are at least reminded which way we should be facing and towards what we should be aspiring.

This message is appropriate and timely for us as we approach Rosh Hashanah. Rosh Hashanah is a good time to accept upon ourselves a kabbala (something extra that we wish to commit to). We can choose an area of our lives that needs improvement and specify a small, manageable change. Then we can implement strategies to increase our chances of sticking to it consistently. At this time of year, we may feel a spiritual boost, helping us to act on a higher spiritual level than usual. However, we are only human, and we may not be able to stick to that spiritual level for the remainder of the year. Nevertheless, it is still beneficial to have set the tone and the direction for the year ahead.

Often, we take on “New Years’ Resolutions”, but then become disheartened when they do not stick. Rabbi Yisrael Reisner tells the story of someone who became very inspired by the Daf Yomi siyum which is celebrated approximately every seven years. (Many groups around the world follow the cycle

of learning one page of the Gemara every single day. An enormous worldwide siyum or celebration takes place when the cycle is completed and the groups complete learning through the entire Gemara.) This person was inspired by the celebration and decided to join the program. However, his inspiration did not last, and he only managed to complete the first masechet of the Gemara (masechet Brachot) before dropping out of the program. Seven years later, he again became inspired, and he joined the program for a second time. However, it proved too difficult, and he dropped out again after only managing to complete masechet Brachot for a second time. When another siyum was held seven years later, he announced that he would not be joining the program again because he had already tried twice and failed. He felt there was no point in trying again. Rabbi Reisman commented that instead of lamenting his failure, this person could have celebrated the fact that he completed learning through masechet Brachot once every seven years! That's certainly significant. It's Torah, and it's a real accomplishment!<sup>1</sup>

Rabbi Reisman admits himself that he tries to take on a new kabala during Rosh Hashanah, though he doesn't always succeed in sticking to it as well as he hoped. One year, took on a kabala to have more kavana at a certain point in his davening. He managed to achieve this about 30% of the time. After he shared his experience with his congregation, a congregant confided in him that his story gave him chizuk. The congregant had also taken on something new for Rosh Hashanah but felt despairing at his progress. However, he had gained encouragement when he heard that Rabbi Reisman was only at 30%, because he realised that he was tracking better than the Rabbi!

Imagine the following scenario. You are back at school and there is a big exam coming up. The teacher agrees to give the class the whole afternoon in the library for personal study for the exam. After an hour, the teacher sees that everyone is working well, and she leaves. The students then take advantage of the situation, putting down their books and starting to mess around. Was the first hour of study they did seriously worthwhile? If the students couldn't keep their study schedule up after the teacher left, does that mean they should not have bothered learning for the first hour? The answer is obvious. The gain during that first hour was real and valuable. It might even make the difference between them passing and failing the exam. Similarly, if we take on an extra mitzvah but we cannot maintain it for as long as we hoped, the short time that we did spend working on that area is still precious and meaningful. (Even that feeling of disappointment that we have when we realise that we didn't fully complete our goals yet is precious to Hashem, demonstrating to Him that at least we have the desire to improve. Also, our feelings of disappointment might give us the push to try again.)

Of course, it is better to take on something new and manage to stick to it. Over time it may become a habit and be integrated into our personalities. That is why it is recommended that we choose something small and manageable to work on. However, the fact there is the possibility of us not maintaining our new level consistently should not preclude us from trying a new kabbala each year. Remember, it is only our Yetzer Hara trying to convince us not to continue trying if we fail.

Let's try something this week:

1. Rosh Hashanah is getting very close, but it is still not too late to take on a new goal of self-improvement. Pick an area that needs improvement – in our service of Hashem and/or in the mitzvot that relate to our fellow man.
2. Let's learn a lesson from the bikkurim. Our first efforts are very precious and have an elevated status. Even if we have tried to improve many times in the past without long term success, let's not give up hope. Just keep on trying and celebrate any and every achievement we make.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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<sup>1</sup> The members of my Gemara shiur will find this story amusing. Four years ago, we started learning masechet Brachot once a week over Zoom. We are now about halfway through. At this rate it will take us over seven years to complete the masechet! We just started the fifth perek. Anyone interested in joining can send me an email.