

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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

Tetzaveh – Towards better tefillah

In this week's Parsha of Tetzaveh we learn about the special clothes worn by the Kohen Gadol. One of the items that he wore was the Choshen Mishpat – the breastplate which contained twelve precious stones. Each stone was inscribed with the name of one of the 12 tribes. The breastplate was folded in half to form a pocket. A slip of parchment containing secret names of Hashem was inserted into this pocket. The Choshen Mishpat was used in order to ask Hashem questions. The Kohen Gadol would pose a question, and Hashem would send His answer via the letters on the stones which would light up in response.

However, the letters that lit up could be ordered in a number of different ways. The Kohen Gadol required Ruach Hakodesh (Divine Inspiration) in order to read the letters in the correct order and thus decipher the message. The Ramban explains that the Kohen Gadol would meditate on the names of Hashem, and this meditation would inspire him to read the luminous letters in the correct order.

The Choshen Mishpat plays an interesting role in the famous story of Chana's prayer.¹ Chana was childless for many years. Together with her husband Elkanah, she would travel regularly to the Mishkan in Shiloh. Elkanah was involved in kiruv – he would deliberately take a circuitous route to the Mishkan in order to encourage as many people as possible to join them in the pilgrimage. At the Mishkan, Chana would pour out her heart in prayer to Hashem, begging Him for a child.

The Tanach recounts an episode when Chana was praying to Hashem with unusual fervour. Eli, the Kohen Gadol at the time, observed Chana's demeanour and presumed she was drunk. The Vilna Gaon explains that 4 letters lit up on the Choshen Mishpat – ה, כ, ר, ש. Eli read the letters in the wrong order as spelling the word 'shikorah' (שכרה) which means a drunken woman. The letters should have been read as 'k'Sarah' (כשרה) (which means that Chana was righteous like Sarah Imenu) or as 'k'sheirah' (which means a worthy woman).

Chana explained to Eli that she was not drunk. Rather, she was an aggrieved woman who was pouring out her soul to Hashem. Eli told Chana to go in peace and gave her a bracha that her prayers should be answered. Chana's prayers were answered. She was blessed with a son, Shmuel the prophet, whose greatness was comparable in some respects to that of Moshe and Aaron². Shmuel would go on to lead the Jewish people, eventually anointing Shaul Hamelech and David Hamelech.

From this incident of Eli's interaction with Chana, the Gemara in Brachot³ derives many important laws about the appropriate way to pray and about interpersonal relations. Let's look at some of those laws.

- The pasuk says: “*Chana was speaking in her heart*”⁴. From here, the Gemara derives that one who prays should direct their heart towards Hashem. This might seem obvious in theory, yet many of us can stand in shule praying day after day, without even once thinking about Hashem (let alone moving ourselves to a level of heartfelt emotional connection to Hashem)!

¹ Shmuel I (1:12-17)

² See Tehillim 99:6.

³ Brachot 31a-31b.

⁴ Shmuel I 1:13

- The pasuk said that Chana's lips moved but her voice was not heard. From here the Gemara derives that during the pinnacle of our davening, the Shemoneh Esreh, we need to pronounce the words with our lips, but we should not raise our voice.
- Eli accuses Chana of being drunk and chastises her. From here we learn that we are not permitted to pray while drunk. This law is very relevant for the upcoming festival of Purim. (Those who do drink on Purim should make sure that they daven Mincha before the seudah and then daven Maariv late once they are sober.⁵)
- When Eli realised that he was mistaken he told Chana to go in peace and he gave her a bracha. From here we learn that if you mistakenly accuse someone, it is appropriate to placate them and to also give them a bracha.
- When Chana returned to Eli with her son Shmuel, she said: "I am the woman who **stood with you** here, praying to Hashem". The Gemara notes that Chana and Eli were both standing. From here the Gemara derives that it is prohibited to sit within 4 amot (about 2 metres) of someone who is praying the Shemoneh Esreh. According to the Ritva⁶, the reason for this prohibition is to demonstrate respect for Hashem's Shechinah which rests in the 4 amot surrounding a person who is engaged in prayer. Alternatively, the Tur explains that someone who stays seated near someone else who is praying and acknowledging Hashem's kingship is giving the impression that they do not care to do the same. However, a person who is themselves engaged in prayer (e.g. reciting the Shema) is allowed to sit near someone who is praying.⁷ This permission to sit only applies when one is to the *side* or *behind* the person davening. It is prohibited to sit in *front* of someone praying, even if you yourself are davening.⁸

Prayer seems to be exclusively ben adam l'makom – between people and Hashem. However, prayer can also be linked to our interpersonal interactions. For instance, we can pray to have peaceful interactions with others, and to be able to understand them and find favour in their eyes. We need to pray to Hashem and ask Him to grant us success in our dealings with others, because the success of our actions is dependant on other people and their reactions. If we want to do a good deed or help someone out, we need to understand their needs. People can be very difficult to understand. (It is difficult enough to understand ourselves, let alone each other!) We need to pray for Divine assistance to improve our middot and to successfully interact with each other in a peaceful and pleasant manner.

We pray to Hashem formally at least three times a day. It is one of the ways that we develop our relationship with our Creator. However, we should also connect informally with Hashem throughout the day.⁹ Prayer is called "Avodah" which means work. Successful prayer requires hard work. If we can really pray from the heart, like Chana, this demonstrates our belief that Hashem really listens and cares. And if we can manage to shed a genuine tear, even better, for the gates of tears are never closed. Let's use this week as an opportunity to focus on improving the quality and kavana of our tefillot.

Let's try something this week:

1. Focus on how well we pray. Do we think about Hashem? Do we know the laws of prayer? Do we concentrate on the meaning of the words? Do we bring ourselves to heartfelt emotion? Do we pour out our heart and soul and thereby show Hashem how much we sincerely believe that He is listening and caring?
2. Ask Hashem for help in our performance of the mitzvot ben adam l'chavero. This request can be made during our formal prayers (e.g. during the bracha of Shema Koleinu in the Shemoneh Esreh) or informally, at any time we feel. Hashem is always ready to listen if we want to approach Him.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁵ This year, when Purim falls on Friday, one can have the seudah in the morning and then daven Mincha later in the afternoon. Please speak to your Rabbi for more guidance on how to properly celebrate Purim this year.

⁶ One of the great Rishonim, who lived in Spain.

⁷ See Artscroll Gemara Brachot, footnote 30 on page 31b4.

⁸ See Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 102:1 and please check with your Rabbi for details.

⁹ Yosef HaTzaddik was known to do this regularly. See Rashi on Breishit 39:3.