

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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

Emor – The Chagim and Shabbat

This week, we read Parashat Emor. The second half of the Parasha, starting with the fourth Aliya (chapter 23 in the book of Vayikra) includes details about each of the festivals in the Jewish calendar. Starting with Pesach, the Parsha then discusses Shavuot, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Sukkot.

The introductory words to this section appear somewhat strange. The first 4 pasukim of chapter 23 read as follows:

- 1 Hashem spoke to Moshe saying:
- 2 Speak to the children of Israel and say to them: Hashem's appointed festivals that you shall designate as holy occasions. **These are my appointed festivals:**
- 3 For six days work may be done, and **the seventh day is Shabbat Shabbaton** (a day of complete rest), a holy occasion, you shall not do any work, it is a Shabbat for Hashem in all of your dwelling places.
- 4 **These are Hashem's appointed festivals** which you shall designate in their appropriate time.

The Parasha then continues by discussing the festivals, starting with Pesach.

Pasuk 2 introduces the festivals; pasuk 3 discusses Shabbat; and then Pasuk 4 introduces the festivals again. Why does the Torah interrupt the discussion of the festivals to mention Shabbat?

There are a number of possible answers. The Vilna Gaon provides a brilliant explanation. He explains that pasuk 3 is not talking about Shabbat at all. It is actually talking about the festivals as well. The 'six days' on which work is allowed, refers to the six days of the year that are festivals according to the Torah. In order to understand this, we need to remember that the second day of Yom Tov only applies outside of Israel and is Rabbinic in origin (i.e. it is not from the Torah). The six days listed in the Torah are: the first day of Pesach, the last day of Pesach, Shavuot, Rosh Hashanah,¹ the first day of Sukkot and Shemini Atzeret. On these six days we are allowed to do some forms of work for the purpose of the festival – we can cook, we can transfer fire and we can carry (even if there is no Eruv). The seventh day referred to in pasuk 3 (Shabbat Shabbaton) refers to Yom Kippur. This festival **is** a complete rest day without any work.² In fact, later on in the Parasha, Yom Kippur is referred to as "Shabbat Shabbaton" (see Vayikra 23:22) which is exactly the same term that is used in our pasuk.

We can suggest another possible explanation as to why the Torah mentioned Shabbat in the middle of its discussion about the festivals. First we need to provide some background. When it comes to the festivals, Hashem granted the Jewish people significant autonomy. The Bet Din would declare each new month based on witnesses that had seen the new moon. If no witnesses came in a particular month (e.g. because it was cloudy and no-one saw the moon) then the Bet Din would determine the

¹ Rosh Hashanah is actually celebrated for 2 days, even in Israel, but that was instituted by the Rabbis for historical and practical reasons. According to the Torah law, Rosh Hashanah is only one day.

² The word 'work' is used loosely. The real prohibition is 'melacha' which includes 39 specific categories of creative labour.

date of the new month based on their mathematical calculations. The Bet Din would also decide whether a particular year would be a leap year or not³. The Bet Din would declare leap years to make sure that Pesach fell in the spring and for various other practical considerations. In this way, the Jewish people themselves determined the calendar and therefore whether a certain day would be a biblical festival, or not. This idea is captured in a Midrash:⁴ The angels asked Hashem when the holy days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur will occur. Hashem responded to the angels: "It's not up to Me, let's go and ask the Bet Din below on Earth". What an amazing level of autonomy Hashem has granted us.⁵

In contrast, we the Jewish people do not have any input into the dates when Shabbat will fall. Shabbat occurs every seven days, no matter what.

Incidentally, that is the reason why the Kiddush for a festival evening that falls on Friday night says as follows: "Blessed are you Hashem, who sanctifies Shabbat, Israel and the festivals." Shabbat is mentioned first because it was the first to be sanctified and its sanctity comes from Hashem. Israel is then mentioned before the festivals because the sanctity of the festivals comes from us.

With that background, we can suggest an explanation as to why Hashem interrupted the description of the festivals to remind us about Shabbat. Hashem has invested us with the amazing ability to control the days of the festivals and thereby imbue holiness into those days. But before He hands over the reins, He reminds us that all holiness ultimately comes from Him. Before we wield the power and the discretion that Hashem has granted to us, we need to humble ourselves and remind ourselves Who is ultimately in charge and Who gave us this power.

This principle applies in all areas of our lives. We humans have the amazing ability to conquer our environment, exploit the resources of the world, and dominate our surroundings. It is sometimes easy to forget that we are subject to a higher Source. Additionally, in terms of moral behaviour and our interpersonal relationships, we are often tempted to believe that we know what is best. But we need to have the humility to recognise from Whom all our resources stem and to remember that our moral decisions must be based on a Higher Power who gave us the brain to make decisions. The only truly objective source is Hashem and the Torah. Anything else is subject to human biases, weaknesses and fallibility. In order to overcome these biases and fallibilities, we can seek out guidance from a Rav who knows us well. He can help us to apply Torah wisdom to our lives.

As we travel closer in time to Shavuot, we can remember that the Torah is a gift that Hashem gave us at Har Sinai. It is the only true source of objectivity and emet (truth) in the world.

Let's try something this week:

1. Before making a big decision, or if we are struggling with a dilemma or need some advice, we should humble ourselves and seek guidance from the Torah, for instance by asking a Rabbi who is familiar with us and our circumstances.
2. When we are in a position to exercise authority or control, try to remind ourselves that we are just Hashem's agents in this world. All power, intellect, skills, talents and authority ultimately come from Him.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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³ Leap years contain an extra month called Adar Bet.

⁴ Midrash Rabbah (Devarim 2:14).

⁵ These days, in the absence of the Bet Hamikdash, we use a fixed calendar which was established by Hillel II.