

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Ki Teitzei
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Ki Teitzei – Slow and steady wins the race

Most of us know Aesop's famous fable of the tortoise and the hare. The tortoise challenged the hare to a race. The hare took off at a blinding pace. The tortoise just kept plodding on, one slow step after another. The hare was so confident he would win, that he decided to take a nap. When he finally woke up, he discovered that the tortoise was too far in front for him to catch up. The tortoise won.

There is a source for this truth in our own writings, as it says: “The race does not belong to the swift” (Kohelet 9:11).

In this week's Parsha of Ki Tetze, Moshe teaches Bnei Yisrael about a large number of mitzvot. Though they have already learnt about these mitzvot, Moshe seizes this final chance before he dies to make sure that Bnei Yisrael know the details of each of the mitzvot. One mitzvah that is covered in this parsha is the mitzvah of tzitzit:

You shall make for yourself twisted threads on the four corners of your garment with which you cover yourself. (Devarim 22:12)

According to Torah law, it is forbidden for a Jewish male to wear a four cornered garment unless that garment has halachically acceptable tzitzit on each of the four corners. There is no Torah obligation to wear such a four-cornered garment. These days it is unusual for men to wear such garments as part of their normal clothing. However, the Rabbis have obligated men to wear such four-cornered garments so that we can obtain the benefit of the mitzvah.¹ Therefore, the positive obligation to wear tzitzit is, in effect, a Rabbinic law.²

When a man comes to shul in the morning for Shacharit, he needs to put on his tallit and his tefillin. Which mitzvah takes precedence? One might think that tefillin should take priority over the tallit because they are a Torah level mitzvah, while the tallit is only a Rabbinic requirement. However, that is not the case. There is a principle in halacha as follows: “Tadir v'she'eino tadir, tadir kodem” – if we are faced with two mitzvot, the mitzvah that is performed more frequently takes precedence.³ We wear our tallit every single day of the week. We only wear tefillin on regular weekdays - we don't wear tefillin on Shabbat and Yom Tov and some don't wear tefillin on Chol Hamoed. Therefore, the tallit is worn more frequently and based on this principle it takes priority. We don our tallit first and only then put on our tefillin.

Why do we give priority to the mitzvot that are tadir (more frequent)? Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan teaches us an amazing insight that we can learn from this principle of ‘tadir’.⁴ There are two ways that we can grow in our service of Hashem – we can grow in leaps and bounds or we can grow in a slow and steady manner. Which way is better? We might presume that it is better to grow quickly. Doesn't it

¹ In fact, we wear two such four-cornered garments. We wear a smaller one under our shirt throughout the day, and a larger one (known as the tallit) over our shirt during the Shacharit prayer.

² See Menachot 41a, where an angel told Rav Ketina that one can be punished for not wearing tzitzit during a time of divine anger and judgement. During such times, one is responsible for not making an effort toward spiritual self-improvement.

³ This principle is mentioned a number of times in the Gemara. See for example, Brachot 27a.

⁴ “Tzitzit – A Thread of Light”, by Aryeh Kaplan, NCSY 1993.

make sense to reach our destination as quickly as possible? However, a risk with this fast approach is that by improving too quickly, we might take on more than we can really handle and end up achieving nothing.

There is another principle that appears in the Gemara – “Tefasta Meruba lo tefasta, tefasta ketuna tefasta”. Loosely translated, this means that if we try to grab too much, we will end up with nothing. If we try to take a more modest amount, we will at least end up with something. If we are inauthentic and try to take on things that we are not ready for, we might become disheartened and we may even slip back further than we were originally!

Usually, the most effective and lasting way to reach our destination is to do something regularly and consistently, like the tortoise. For instance, it is more authentic to take on a goal that is small and achievable. Rabbi Kaplan teaches us that this is one reason why mitzvot that are more frequent are given priority. It teaches us the importance of being regular and consistent in our service of Hashem.

Why do we often fall into the trap of taking on more than we can handle? And why do we often find it so difficult to take on small improvements and stick with them consistently?

Perhaps one reason is because the slow and steady approach may appear boring. It's much more exciting to aim for and achieve a big, tangible change. The adrenalin rush and the satisfaction of achievement spurs us on. When we only take on a small goal, the results may be barely noticeable and we may fail to receive the same emotional impact as a potential 'big' change.

Another reason may be that our Yetzer Hara is at play. The Yetzer Hara understands very well the dangers of taking on too much. It wants to convince us that we are better than we are really are. It tells us things like: “Why are you just planning to learn an extra 5 minutes a day, you can learn the entire Gemara this year!” or “Why are you just planning to count to ten and take a few deep breaths before responding in anger, you should be able to wipe out all traces of anger!” We often fall for such tricks of the wily Yetzer Hara. And if we do fail in our attempt to improve, there is an additional risk - we may not bother trying again next time because we convince ourselves that our attempts to improve are futile. If we are aware of this trick, we can avoid falling into the trap of taking on too much and the likely failure that follows.

Admittedly, there are sometimes unique moments in life when a dramatic change is called for and is appropriate. However, these moments are generally not very common. Usually, the most effective way to achieve sustained improvement in the service of Hashem is to act like the tortoise. This is one of the lessons that we can learn from the tzitzit.

This message is very relevant for the month of Elul. We are now only a few weeks away from Rosh Hashanah and the aseret yemei teshuva. There is a very prevalent custom to take on something new at this auspicious time of the year. Instead of reaching for a goal that is too big for us to maintain, perhaps we should instead choose something small and manageable and then stick with it, plodding along, one small, slow step at a time. We can seek out the 'low-lying fruit', the easy improvements that are more within our grasp. Then, when we stand before Hashem in judgement, we will less likely be judged for failing to accomplish things that are totally out of our reach. Instead, we will be judged for our successful achievements, no matter how small. Once we have maintained our new goal for long enough, it will hopefully become ingrained as a new life-long habit. Then we will be encouraged to pick another new, manageable goal and hopefully achieve that one too!

Let's try something this week:

1. With only a few weeks left until Rosh Hashanah(!), NOW is the time to take on a new goal of self-improvement. Pick an area where you need to improve - in your service of Hashem or in the mitzvot that relate to our fellow man.
2. When picking a goal, let's learn a lesson from the tzitzit and the tortoise. Let's aim a bit lower and try our best to maintain consistency, regularity and reliability in order to achieve success.