

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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

Terumah – Choosing the appropriate middah

In this week's Parasha, Hashem instructs Moshe to ask Bnei Yisrael to donate certain materials for the Mishkan. They were not obligated to donate¹. Rather, each person was free to give as much or as little as they chose, or to not give at all.

The Nesi'im (princes) of the tribes had a wonderful opportunity. As leaders, they could have set the example by being the first to fulfil this mitzva of donating towards the Mishkan. However, they decided to step back and allow the rest of the nation to donate first, and they offered to cover any shortfall. This may sound sensible and generous, but was it the ideal decision?

The Nesi'im are actually criticised for their decision. Though they were willing to donate any shortfall for the Mishkan, in the end there was almost no shortfall! The rest of the people had donated almost everything that was needed. There was only one exception - the special precious stones for the Choshen Mishpat² that no-one else possessed and therefore were not able to donate. In Parashat Vayakhel (which we will read IY”H in 3 weeks' time), we will learn that the Nesi'im did donate these precious stones for the Kohen Gadol's uniform³. However, in that pasuk, the word 'Nesi'im' is written as 'הנשאם', which is lacking the letter 'yud'. Rashi explains that missing a letter signifies a rebuke for their behaviour. Because they were 'lazy' (Rashi's description), one could suggest that their name was spelt in a 'lazy' manner, without the letter 'yud'.

It is difficult for us to judge the Nesi'im. For most of us, making such an offer to cover any shortfall in response to a request for donations would be a very high level. But evidently, at their exalted level, the Nesi'im demonstrated a shortcoming. They should have exhibited more zerizut (alacrity) to perform this special mitzva.

Let's consider the way that Hashem phrased the request for these donations. The request to Bnei Yisrael was phrased as follows: "Speak to Bnei Yisrael and have them **take** for me an offering...".⁴ We would have expected the request to be phrased as "give" not "take". However, this phraseology reveals that donating to the Mishkan was actually an *opportunity* for Bnei Yisrael. Though they were *giving* financially, they were actually *taking* spiritually. Of course, Hashem did not really rely on the people to donate their possessions in order that the Mishkan could be built. Obviously, Hashem does not need our donations. Rather, in His kindness, Hashem was giving Bnei Yisrael the precious opportunity to be involved in the building of the Mishkan.

The Mesillat Yesharim⁵ provides us with a list of character traits that we should seek to acquire in our service of Hashem. The character traits are provided in a particular order based on a Baraita in the name of R' Pinchas ben-Yair. Alacrity is the second character trait in the list. The Mesillat Yesharim also guides us as to how to move up the list of character traits – from watchfulness to alacrity, cleanliness of sin, abstention of improper practices, purity, piety, humility, fear of sin and finally holiness.

The Hebrew word for character traits is 'middot'. This word shares the same grammatical root as two other Hebrew words: 'madim' (uniform) and 'midah' (measure). There are no coincidences in Lashon Hakodesh (the holy language). If a Hebrew word is grammatically related to another Hebrew word, it means that there is an intrinsic connection between those two words⁶. Thus, there must be something that we can learn from the words 'uniform' and 'measure' that we can apply to the idea of character traits. Let's consider this in further depth.

¹ There was also a compulsory component of the donation, for the silver shekels that were used for the foundations of the Mishkan. However, most of the materials used for the Mishkan were donated freely.

² The breast plate of the Kohen Gadol.

³ Shmot 35:27.

⁴ Shmot 35:2.

⁵ Written by the Ramchal.

⁶ Of course, this only applies to 'authentic' or Biblical Hebrew, not modern Hebrew or slang.

Uniforms: We wear uniforms at certain times and when attending particular places. When it is no longer appropriate, we take our uniforms off. For instance, a child that goes to school will wear a uniform while they are at school. A worker will wear his or her uniform or appropriate work attire while they are at work. There is a different uniform for playing sport. We also have a uniform (special clothing that is set aside) for Shabbat and Yom Tov. We choose the uniform that is appropriate and we change our clothing as needed.

Character traits should be similar to a uniform. We should be able to 'wear' the appropriate character trait for each situation. For example:

- Sometimes it is appropriate to act with alacrity (e.g. when running to perform a mitzva). At other times it is appropriate to be more cautious (e.g. pausing and thinking before reacting with anger).
- Sometimes it is appropriate to act with generosity (e.g. when giving tzedaka to a needy person). At other times it is appropriate to use gevurah (strength to hold back) (e.g. when one does not have enough money for their own needs, or when it is known that the person asking for the money will use it inappropriately.)

Measure: Character traits are also linked to the concept of measurement. Each character trait is only appropriate and ideal when exercised with the appropriate measure. For example, sometimes it is appropriate to be demonstrate kindness by giving someone a lot of assistance. At other times it is appropriate to be less generous with our time (e.g. if we help our children too much, we may stifle their growth and inhibit their independence).

Ideally, we should work on our character to the point that we are in a position to decide what Middah to use in each situation and to what degree the middah should be exercised. In order to achieve this, we need to be in control of our emotions and our actions. The Vilna Gaon⁷ writes that the main reason why are in this world is to improve our middot.

Chovot Halevavot⁸ lists a number of character traits and instructs us as to the occasions on which they are appropriate to be used. We see that all of our character traits can be appropriate in different times and places. Mercy is appropriate for the needy and the poor. Ruthlessness is appropriate when taking vengeance against the wicked. The traits of anger and pride should generally be avoided, but even they can be appropriate in small measure in certain, specific circumstances. For example, anger is appropriate when falsehood prevails over truth. Pride is appropriate when meeting those who deny G-d, to demonstrate our opposition to their views.

Pride may also be appropriate to encourage one to avoid sin. When faced with a temptation to sin, it can be helpful to stir up one's pride and say to oneself "That action is beneath me. I am too good for that!"

The Nesi'im were criticized for failing to have the appropriate measure of alacrity. Alacrity is often the appropriate middah to demonstrate when doing a mitzva. As children learn in kindergarten – "when a mitzva comes your way, you do it right away". By exhibiting alacrity, we demonstrate our attitude towards the mitzva, and ultimately our attitude to Hashem and His Torah.

When we are faced with the opportunity to do a certain mitzvah, we should pay attention to the measure of our middah of alacrity. Consider the following scenario as an example:

Reuven finally comes home after a long hard day at the office. He feels exhausted. He collapses into his favourite chair and starts to read the paper. His child asks him for help with homework, but he says: "Sorry, I'm tired, see if Mummy can help you". Then the phone rings – it's an important client with an urgent request. He jumps out of his chair and races to the phone. He then spends the rest of the evening working furiously in his study to give the client what is needed.

The enthusiasm and speed attached to each of Reuven's actions reveal a lot about his priorities in life.

Let's try something this week:

1. Realise when we naturally exhibit the character trait of alacrity, and when we fail to do so.
2. Be aware that those mitzvot where we struggle to show alacrity are often exactly the areas that we need to work on most. This is our point of growth.
3. Try to plan in advance how we can summon up more internal fire and enthusiasm to do Hashem's will in this area. One idea is to learn more about that mitzva. Another idea is to pray and ask Hashem for help to feel more enthusiasm and less laziness.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁷ In his commentary to Mishlei (4:13).

⁸ Duties of the Heart, a classic mussar work by Rabbi Bachya ibn Pakuda, who is believed to have lived in Spain in the first half of the eleventh century.