

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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

Bamidbar – The power of reframing

In this week's Parasha of Bamidbar we learn about the formation of Bnei Yisrael as they camped around the Mishkan. The Parasha starts with a Hashem commanding Moshe to conduct a census of the people:

Take a census (literally: “lift the head” – שאו את ראש) of all the congregation of the Children of Israel...
(Bamidbar 1:2)

What is the meaning of “lift the head” and why is such unusual, esoteric language used to describe the taking of the census?

In his commentary, the Ramban discusses this phrase and its possible meaning. He brings two separate explanations that seem at odds with each other.

First explanation: The Ramban quotes from Midrash¹ that “lift the head” is used because it has the connotation of a person saying to an executioner “off with his head”! The phrase is thus used as a disparagement. There is a threat of death hanging over the Jewish people and it will become manifest when Bnei Yisrael are punished for the sin of the spies.

Second explanation: The Ramban quotes another Midrash² which puts a positive spin on this phrase. It explains that lifting the head is an expression of greatness. We see this phrase at the end of sefer Breishit when Yosef interprets the dream of the cup bearer favourably. Yosef tells him that Pharaoh will “lift his head” and restore him to his post.³

Interestingly, the Ramban points out that Yosef used the exact same phrase when interpreting the dream of the baker, however in this case the outcome was not so good: “In another three days Pharaoh will *lift your head* from you and hang you from a tree”!⁴

These two explanations that the Ramban brings are exact opposites of each other! The threat of death or a rise to greatness. So which one is it? Which meaning is correct? The Ramban explains that the interpretation is up to Bnei Yisrael. Hashem deliberately used an ambiguous term to leave things open-ended. If Bnei Yisrael are meritorious they will rise to greatness. But if not, then the outcome will be “off with his head”!

There is an important message here for us. The same message can be interpreted positively or negatively. It is all in our hands. The Gemara⁵ spends quite a bit of time discussing the meaning of various dreams. One of the conclusions of the Gemara is that the meaning of the dream follows its interpretation. If we interpret a dream positively, then it will be positive. For example – if one dreams of breaking glass, this could mean that an expensive crystal heirloom will be broken, or even worse, it could relate to breaking windows and Kristallnacht. On the other hand, it could foreshadow the sound of breaking glass under a chuppah!

The Gemara cites many examples of dreams that appear on their surface to be negative but then explains how they can be interpreted in a positive manner. For example, one who dreams that his hands have been cut off, which sounds like an awful dream – this could mean that he will become wealthy and will no longer need to rely on the labour of his hands.

¹ Midrash Midbar Sinai Rabbah 1:9.

² The Ramban quotes the source of the Midrash as Vayikra Rabbah but in our version of the Midrash this idea appears in Bamidbar Rabbah.

³ Breishit 40:13.

⁴ Breishit 40:19.

⁵ Brachot 55-57.

If one has a bad dream, there is a procedure that can be performed to ameliorate the dream.⁶ However some authorities suggest⁷ that the best approach in dealing with bad dreams is to just immediately declare that the dream is positive!⁸

If we work hard at it, we can usually find a positive interpretation for an apparently negative event. The idea of seeing the same situation in a more positive light is called 'reframing'. We can 'reframe' our circumstances and focus on the positive side. For instance, many of us have been stuck indoors for long periods of time and forbidden from leaving our homes. This can be quite difficult at times and many of us are suffering from cabin fever. However, we could reframe the situation and see it as providing an excellent opportunity to spend more quality time with our family members, call relatives and friends that we haven't spoken to for a while and spend more time learning Torah. We can view the situation as giving us a break from the constant stresses that we have to battle on a typical day in the big wide world.

Note, this does not mean that if someone is going through a hard time we should always just focus on the positive and try to cheer them up. The implications of the Corona pandemic do not just include forced time indoors. For those who have suffered the loss of a close family member, or who are unwell themselves, it is not helpful to just ignore their pain and try to reframe what they are going through. People who are going through a very difficult time often need empathy and support. Reframing is an exercise that is best performed on ourselves (though we can sometimes teach others how to do it).

One idea that I heard is to play the "Maybe" game with your children. This involves presenting them with a scenario that seems negative and then challenging them to come up with at least 3 creative explanations to reframe the situation in a positive light. For example, "you were walking back to class and your friend bumped into you and ran off without apologising". "Maybe he was rushing to get to school before me to prepare a surprise party for me." "Maybe he wasn't feeling well and he was rushing to see the nurse". "Maybe he wasn't wearing his glasses and he thought I was a tree!" This is great training for her kids to become expert "reframers". This skill is also very helpful in keeping the mitzva of *dan l'chaf zchut* (judging everyone favourably).⁹

The following anecdote demonstrates a situation when reframing is not the right approach:

The story is told of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein who was visiting a mourner during his shiva. The mourner lived very far away and the drive took quite a while. When he arrived, he sat quietly in the room with the mourner without saying a word. (There is a halacha that one may not speak to a mourner until the mourner begins to speak first.¹⁰) After a time, Rabbi Feinstein got up and said the traditional words of comfort that one says to a mourner¹¹ and then left. Not a single other word had been spoken during the entire visit. On the drive back, the driver commented that the visit and the long drive was a waste of time. Rabbi Feinstein corrected him: "On the contrary, you have no idea how much the mourner benefited from just having some company and by showing him that we care".

When someone is going through a difficult situation, the trick is to know what that person needs at the time. Sometimes a person needs a bit of help to focus on the positive and sometimes they just need some empathy and a listening ear. However, as a general rule, whenever we are confronted with a situation, we have the power to choose how we interpret it. Why not choose the positive approach?

Let's try something this week:

1. When we are faced with a difficult situation, we can try our best to reframe it in a positive light. Sometimes it helps to take a piece of paper and pen and write down as many positive things about the situation as we can.
2. When our friend is facing a difficult situation, try to work out what would be best for them at the time – empathy or some help in seeing the positive side.

Chag sameach! The next edition of Darchai Noam will B"H be for the Shabbat of 13 June (21 Sivan).

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁶ See page 922 of the standard Ashkenaz Artscroll siddur.

⁷ Heard in the name of a Rosh Kolloel from Israel.

⁸ In some cases, it is appropriate to fast if one has a bad dream, sometimes even on Shabbat! One should speak to their Rabbi about which approach to take.

⁹ Pirkai Avot 1:6.

¹⁰ Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah 376:1. People feel uncomfortable with silence and therefore this halacha is unfortunately often not observed. However, each case needs to be judged on its merits. If it is clear to the comforters that the mourner would benefit from a discussion but has difficulty speaking, then the comforter may speak first.

¹¹ Hamakom Yenachem Etchem... (May Hashem comfort you amongst the other mourners of Zion and Yerushalayim).