

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?

Parashat Bamidbar – Learning from our challenges

This week we read Parashat Bamidbar which deals with the census of Bnei Yisrael and their formation around the Mishkan as they camped and travelled in the Midbar. When the Torah introduces the passage dealing with the Leviim, it lists Aharon's children and revisits the death of his two oldest sons - Nadav and Avihu.

*These were the names of the sons of Aharon, the firstborn was Nadav, and Avihu, Elazar and Itamar... Nadav and Avihu died before Hashem when they offered an alien fire before Hashem in the Wilderness of Sinai, **and they had no children**” (Bamidbar, 3:2-4)*

We first read of Nadav and Avihu's sin and death in Parashat Shemini.¹ They brought a 'strange fire' into the Kodesh Hakodashim (which they were not commended to bring). As a punishment, they were consumed by a holy fire that emanated from 'before Hashem'. Though it seems from this passage that their sin was to serve Hashem in an inappropriate manner, the Sages explain their punishment as having arisen from a variety of sins. These included (amongst others): deciding a law in the presence of Moshe, entering the Kodesh Hakodashim without permission, entering after drinking wine, their failure to get married and looking forward to the time when Moshe and Aharon would die and they would replace them as leaders.

Note that Nadav and Avihu were extraordinarily righteous. Rav Dessler² points out that Nadav and Avihu were situated immediately behind Moshe and Aharon when Moshe went up Har Sinai. They even preceded the seventy elders.³ After they were killed, Moshe comforted Aharon by saying that in some respects, Nadav and Avihu were even greater than Moshe and Aharon.⁴ The Zohar teaches that their deaths serve as an atonement for all the sins of Israel in all generations!

So how can we understand their behaviour and the long list of sins ascribed to them? Rav Dessler explains that their sin was very subtle and is common to many cases of great people who stumble. At their level, they did not have the proper level of humility. It was this middah which was responsible for all the various sins as outlined above. For example, why did they not get married? They felt that they couldn't find spouses that were good enough for them.

Their lack of humility was manifested in a lack of respect towards Moshe and Aharon (e.g. deciding a law without consulting them, looking forward to their death) and subsequently, a lack of respect towards Hashem (e.g. entering the Kodesh Hakodashim uninvited and with a 'strange fire'). But in our Parasha, the Torah specifically states that they did not have children. What is the significance of this fact to their sins and their lack of humility?

The Chatam Sofer⁵ brilliantly explains this connection. Having children would have taught Nadav and Avihu a lesson in how to be humble and have proper respect. How so? Their children would have

¹ Vayikra 10:1-7.

² Rav Dessler on the Parasha, Parashat Shemini.

³ Shmot 24:9.

⁴ Rashi to Vayikra 10:3.

⁵ I saw this point in “The Short Vort” by Rabbi Moshe Kormornick, Parashat Bamidbar.

inevitably given them the negative experience of not being respected sufficiently. This feeling of pain would in turn have caused them to develop a greater sensitivity to disrespect and thus be able to avoid it themselves.

How can we apply the Chatam Sofer's teaching to those who are not blessed to have children, or those with children that are always perfectly behaved, never disrespectful and never cause any grief? The Chatam Sofer's principle does not just apply to children. We all have to regularly deal with people that are disrespectful. We also deal with people that are rude, mean or just plain annoying, often on a daily basis! Whenever we feel pained by such people, we can use this as an impetus to develop our sensitivity towards that type of behaviour. We should stop and think about whether we exhibit that same negative behaviour towards others, and if so then try to curb it. The same applies whenever we are in a challenging or difficult situation. We should try to derive a personal lesson from the situation.

However, the Chatam Sofer's teaching seems limited in practice. When most of us are confronted with inappropriate behaviour, we are too focused on our own feelings and reaction to learn a lesson. How can we stop focusing on the affront to our sensibilities and shift the focus to what we can learn from the situation? We can take a suggestion from "Battle Plans: How to fight the Yetzer Hara".⁶ Rebbetzin Tzipporah Heller and Sara Yocheved Rigler suggest that we focus on being aware of Hashem's constant involvement in our lives behind the scenes. Whenever we are confronted with a challenging situation, we should consciously look beneath the surface and focus on the idea that Hashem orchestrated this event specifically to teach us a lesson. This may help us to become less reactive and more able to objectively evaluate what lessons can be learned.

The following story demonstrates this principle in action at a very refined level.

Rebbetzin Baila Hinda, the wife of Rabbi Isser Zalman Meltzer, was once boiling some milk on the stove. She was distracted for a moment and when she came back to the kitchen, she saw that the milk had boiled over. This has never happened before, she thought to herself. Heaven is certainly sending me a hint to search my deeds. She carefully thought, and then remembered the milkman that had brought them milk for many years. He was now old and could no longer make deliveries. Once a month the Rebbetzin would organise to send tzedakah to him to support him for the month. She realised that she had not yet paid this old milkman for that month. She immediately went to pay him.

Rebbetzin Baila Hinda used the situation as an opportunity to self-reflect and improve. We too can strive to do this. If a difficult interaction or situation recurs numerous times, it may be that we have not yet learnt the requisite lesson from that situation. And once we do learn that lesson, and work on ourselves in that area, it may be that the challenging situation ceases.

Rebbetzin Tzipporah Heller and Sara Yocheved Rigler note that we might sometimes misinterpret a situation and learn the wrong lesson. However this is still beneficial because we are still using the difficult situation to spur us on to work on ourselves, do teshuva, and improve. And that is always a good outcome!

Let's try something this week:

1. The next time you face a difficult interaction or situation, try to consciously recognise that Hashem is behind the scenes, directing everything. He decided, in His infinite wisdom, that you need to face this challenge.
2. Try to work out what you can learn from difficult situations and strive to improve.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁶ Artscroll, by Rebbetzin Tzipporah Heller and Sara Yocheved Rigler.