

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 – Learning from our children

This week's Parasha of Bamidbar revisits the death of Aharon's oldest two sons, Nadav and Avihu. In Parashat Shemini, we read that during the inauguration of the Mishkan, Nadav and Avihu took it up on themselves to enter the Kodesh Hakodashim and bring an offering to Hashem. As a result of this error, they were punished with instant death.

The Sages bring a number of explanations for what constituted their actual sin. We need to remember that Nadav and Avihu were extraordinarily righteous. The Zohar teaches that their deaths serve as an atonement for all the sins of Israel in all generations! However, at their exalted level they were judged very strictly. Nevertheless, we can still try to learn from their behaviour and punishment and apply those lessons to our own lives.

The description of Nadav and Avihu's death in our Parasha is as follows:

*“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, 3:4)

Why does the Torah mention the fact that Nadav and Avihu had no children?¹ The Midrash suggests that their sin was that they did not try to get married and have children.² The Chatam Sofer explains that by not having children, Nadav and Avihu missed out on the opportunity to learn some important lessons. Rav Shlomo Wolbe teaches that there is no greater factor in improving one's middot than having children!

The Chatam Sofer specifically focuses on the issue of respect. Even the best behaved children will at times treat their parents less respectfully than they should, and this can be painful for the parents. By experiencing this pain, the parents will (hopefully) become more sensitised to the inappropriateness of disrespect and will (hopefully) learn to treat their own parents and elders with more respect. Eventually, this will (hopefully) translate into more respect for Hashem. We can also suggest that this pain may serve as a kaparah, an atonement, for the parents' sins.

This reminds me of the grandmother who bought a water pistol for her granddaughter. The mother was horrified. “Don't you remember that I had a water pistol when I was a young girl and I used to make your life a misery running around the house and making everything wet?!” “Yes dear, I remember very well.”

There are many other lessons that we also can learn from our children. Parents often see themselves in their children. They want their children to follow in their footsteps and achieve what they achieved... or tried to achieve. And we *should* see ourselves in our children. It should be like looking in a mirror. As our children grow, they are striving to refine their middot. There are negative middot that need to be overcome and positive middot that need to be refined. We are most likely struggling with the same

¹ We also discussed this question in Darchai Noam Parashat Bamidbar in 5782. However, this time we will suggest a different approach.

² Vayikra Rabba 12:1 and Yalkut Shimoni 524. Note that this refers to their active choice not to get married and try to have children, not an inability to have children.

challenges (hopefully at a more refined level), and we should use their struggles as a stringboard for our own reflection and growth.

In his classic work, Chovat HaTalmidim, the Rebbe of Piaseczna³ helps the young student to reach his potential. His work was directed at the youth and their issues before the second world war. Now, almost 100 years later, the same issues are just as applicable to us and our youth too. He identifies a number of key spiritual maladies that need to be overcome in order to improve one's avodat Hashem.

One spiritual malady he focuses on is egotistical self-centredness. This malady has spread to many young people who lack maturity and common sense. The Piaseczner Rebbe writes that in previous generations, students felt a certain humility and recognised that they lacked understanding and thus deferred to their parents and teachers. But in more recent generations, youth have a high regard for their own opinions and assume they know what is good for them, both physically and spiritually. If a teacher or parent tries to guide them, they reject their advice, certain that they know better. This malady is a form of arrogance. As Chazal teach in the Gemara⁴, as we come closer to the times of Moshiach, chutzpah of the youth will increase.

The Rebbe then discusses the opposite problem – the malady of low self-esteem. Such a person has no opinions of his own and does not enjoy independence. He just follows along according to the whims of others. A young child has no concept of what is right or wrong. He has no choice but to be influenced by the adults in his life. The Rebbe describes a young child who wants to imitate an adult by putting on adult clothes and shoes. Everyone has a good laugh. Older people are more sophisticated and have learned to imitate the world around them without becoming a laughingstock. But their behaviour is often the same. They have no independent thought and just follow along with whatever behaviour other people or common culture accepts as appropriate.

The Rebbe then points out an amazing observation. There are many people who have both contradictory problems at the same time! When it comes to their parents and teachers, they behave arrogantly, believing that they themselves know better. But when it comes to their peers, or the world at large, they have low esteem and no opinions of their own. They passively allow others to influence their thoughts and behaviour.

We often see this contradictory behaviour in youth, and particularly in teenagers. The arrogant teenager who thinks he knows better than his parents, yet simultaneously blindly follows the whims of his peers.

Not surprisingly, much of the Piaseczner Rebbe's advice is not just relevant to youth but is equally applicable to older readers as well. Now we can follow Rav Wolbe's advice and learn from our children. When we see spiritual maladies such as this in the young, we must ask ourselves honestly if we are guilty of the same behaviour. Do we show enough respect to our elders and leaders? At the same time, are we also influenced by the passing fads in society and secular culture?

It's time to ponder – what else can we learn from our children?

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to honestly assess how the ideas quoted above from Chovat HaTalmidim apply to our own lives. Do we struggle to respect our elders and their advice? Do we cave in to secular culture instead of holding strong to our own opinions and what we know is right?
2. When we see immature behaviour in children, ask ourselves whether we are guilty of the same behaviour. And try to do something about it.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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³ Rav Kalonymous Klamish Shapira. Chovat HaTalmidim was the only book that the Rebbe published in his lifetime. He was murdered in the Holocaust and many of his writings were published posthumously. I have adapted some passages from the Feldheim translation of Chovat HaTalmidim.

⁴ Sotah 49b.