

Parashat Vayera, Rabbi James Proops

The episode of Hagar and Yishmael traversing in the midbar requires much analysis, as we read that they almost reached the point of dying of thirst. Hagar in an unthinkable act of desperation, left her beloved son behind a bush and walked away because she couldn't bring herself to watch him die. Then, suddenly the Torah states that a *Malach* calls to Hagar and proclaims ,

אל-תִּירָאִי - פִּי-שָׁמַע אֱלֹקִים אֶל-קוֹל הַנֶּעֱר בְּאֲשֶׁר הוּא-שָׁם - Fear not, for God has heard the lad's voice in the place where he is. וַיִּפְקַח אֱלֹקִים אֶת-עֵינֶיהָ וַתִּרְא בְּאֵר מַיִם - And God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water.”

It is notable that the *pesukim* do not state that suddenly Hashem produced a well of water in the middle of the desert. The text does not seem to imply that a great miracle occurred, but rather states “יִפְקַח אֱלֹקִים אֶת-עֵינֶיהָ” “God *opened* her eyes” as if to see for the first time that which had been there all along. All too often when faced with challenges we lose the ability to retain clarity of purpose and the ability to see the opportunities that lay right in front of us.

I remember Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis pointing out that there are two Hebrew words which contain the same three letters: ענג (Oneg) meaning joy or pleasure and נגע (Negah) meaning plague. The only difference in the spelling of these two words is where the ע (Ayin) is placed. We also find that the Hebrew word Ayin means eye. Consequently, we can see that depending on where we put the Ayin or where we rest our eyes, will reflect our attitude and how we view a given circumstance. Depending on how we look at a situation will determine how we relate to it. Will we view our situation with a degree of pleasure or as a plague?

Earlier this week, I heard one of my sons say “2020 was the best year ever”. At first I was not sure how to respond to this bizarre statement given that the last seven months have seen the world plunged into chaos not to mention my own family’s personal experience. However then I realized the context of his exclamation. He was endorsing something we had just seen in an advertisement for Shutterfly, a company who produce photo-books, photo gifts and prints. The ad opens with the remark “This year happened...who could forget” and proceeds to give examples of achievements and experiences that individuals may have encountered over the past year. “We all adopted pets” accompanies a photo of a smiling man with his new dog. “I found a new hobby” shows a woman baking in a kitchen surrounded by bread. We are then shown the adorable face of a baby with a voiceover stating “2020 was the best year ever.... Please forgive him, he was born in September”. The purpose of the ad is of course to remember the good things that have happened this year and celebrate them with lasting memories in the form of photo gifts.

What struck me, was that despite all the hardships we as a family have faced, my son’s response to this advertisement was to reflect that in fact it had been a good year and he then began listing all the good things that had happened, both for him and the wider family. The upbeat and positive nature of the message encouraged him to focus on the positive happy memories rather than focus on the difficult ones. As well as the incredible power of advertising, this demonstrates for us the true power of where we put the Ayin in our lives. We cannot allow ourselves to be bogged down by the despair that we may be feeling or the negativity that surrounds us. Rather we must seek out the positive and allow our eyes to be opened so that we can see and appreciate the good lies before us.

Shabbat Shalom