

B'ha'alotecha 5784

Responding to Grey Nierenberg and Dalia Ceresnie

Grey and Dalia, what thoughtful divrei Torah. Grey, you took on the issue of negativity bias, seeing in the cloud that was constantly hovering over the heads of the Israelites the kind of cloud that might hover over our heads making us see everything as more negative than it is. And Dalia, you saw in the parasha the value of asking for help. Moses, fatigued after so many trials and travails with the Israelites, pleads to God for help. You see here not Moses as a weak and failed leader but the very opposite – Moses as a model for what to do when we've reached our limits.

As we all know, it's not easy to ask for help. In fact, your two themes, Grey and Dalia, work in opposition here. Often when we are feeling down or depleted, in crisis or beyond our abilities, negativity kicks in. These are the very times when we might say to ourselves, "No one cares about me, I'm all alone, there's nothing I can do, I have no hope." When our blood sugars are low, when we fall literally or metaphorically, when we feel embarrassed or ashamed, when we feel like a failure – in short, when we need help, that's the very time we are most vulnerable to negativity bias.

And it is in that very moment that it is most important that we know about negativity bias so that we can counteract it. As you taught us, Grey, studies show that we pay attention to negative information more than positive information. Our brains respond more intensely to negative stimuli and we think about negative events more than positive events after they happen. Negativity bias is thought to be an adaptive evolutionary response – in other words, focusing on threat helped to keep us alive. When we know that this is how our brains work, and when we practice counteracting the bias in lots of ordinary moments – noticing and savoring the positive, checking negative thoughts against what's actually happening around us – we have a greater possibility of remembering in those low moments that the negative voice in our head does not reflect reality.

By the way, even seeing the cloud that accompanied the Israelites through the wilderness as a negative symbol is negativity bias, because in the Torah it isn't negative at all – as you taught us, Grey, it only represents protection and G-d's

ever-present care. We are so used to linking clouds to sadness or confusion, grief or anger – think about the cartoons with the dark cloud over someone’s head – that it’s natural you read it that way even if our ancestors didn’t. For them, clouds were protection from the Sinai desert’s blazing sun.

Here at CBE, we find negativity bias to be an ongoing challenge when it comes to chesed. Chesed is our congregation’s effort to ensure that every member of our community is cared for when they need it. That no one is alone when they are hurting or afraid, ill or dying, or joyous and celebrating. We have hundreds of volunteers who do things like deliver care packages, visit people who are older or homebound, help to make a shiva minyan, offer homemade soup or organize meals for weeks, or even wash and prepare the body of a deceased loved one for burial. We even have a team called Solvers that is standing by to solve problems as they emerge, like changing a lightbulb or finding the right care facility for a loved one, or needing a prescription to be picked up.

So what’s the challenge? Only a small percentage of our members ask for help. Most people don’t even tell us when they’re going through a hard time. Because when we’re going through a hard time it’s so hard to believe that it’s safe to need other people. We tell ourselves that people won’t respect us as much, that we’ll look pathetic, that people will judge us. That they’ll think we’re weak. That they’ll think we’re needy. And this is negativity bias, it’s not true. Instead, what is true is that giving to someone else makes us feel closer to them. Helping is bonding. People want to feel needed, and when we have the courage to admit we need help, we allow other people to be needed.

In the parasha, as you taught us Dalia, when Moses asks G-d for help, G-d tells Moses to choose 70 elders who will help him lead the people. G-d then takes the spirit that’s on Moses and distributes it to the 70 elders so that they can help. Then something interesting happens. , Two people who weren’t chosen to be among the 70 – their names were Eldad and Medad – somehow also start to prophesy, meaning the spirit was placed upon them as well. Rashi, the 11th century French commentator, quoting Sifrei Bamidbar, imagines what happened. There were 12 tribes, so when asked to pick 70 people, Moses wanted to be fair and picked 6 from each tribe. That’s 72. So Eldad and Medad were the two who were chosen but then superfluous, they weren’t needed. They received blank lots, and they said to themselves, “We’re not worthy of helping Moses.” So they

stayed back in the camp when the 70 went to the Tent of Meeting. But, that's not how G-d saw it. G-d did not see them as superfluous. G-d knows that everyone is needed. So G-d put the spirit on them too. And when it became clear that they were prophesying, Moses realized that actually more was better, and said, "Would it be that all G-d's people were prophets" In other words, "I need all the help I can get."

This willingness to open ourselves to help, to sharing our burden is really most often about courage. That's true individually and it's true collectively. A few weeks ago Brooklyn celebrated Pride, and CBE was part of the Jewish community's contingent in the Pride parade. In the week before the parade, honestly, we were a little afraid. In response to the war, the LGBT community has included not just anti-Zionist voices but also anti-Jewish voices. There's been some pretty bad antisemitism. What if we marched and people were mean to us, even hateful?

[Note that this is not a sermon about the war, but I have given more than 20 sermons about the war in which I have spoken out very strongly for both Jews and Palestinians to have safety, freedom, equality, and self-governance. I have spoken out very strongly over and over again for hostage return, the end of the war, and humanitarian aid. This is one of my only sermons since October 7th when I won't be saying anything new or additional about the war. You can find it all on our website, YouTube and Spotify.]

So we were not sure what kind of reception we would get at the Brooklyn Pride Parade. I even made signs defending us against the hate we anticipated. And on the day of the parade I was dreading it, expecting to be booed and to face, well, negativity and bias. But that's not what happened at all. We marched down Park Slope's 5th Avenue to unmitigated cheers. Not just general cheers for Pride but specific cheers for us. Our banner said Shabbat Shalom and people got big smiles on their faces and cheered Shabbat Shalom! People shouted out "It's the Jews!" People called, "Yay Jews!" We were stunned. People like us? Non-Jews in the LGBT community have positive feelings about Jews? The answer is yes, many do. We faced no hate at all. Only love.

We need to check our negativity bias, our negative expectations, not only as individuals, but also as a people. We need to keep open the possibility always for

positive interactions and positive regard. We need to be willing to reach out to our non-Jewish neighbors and ask for help with antisemitism when we need help. We are not alone, and sometimes others will want to help us.

Last week I spoke about Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC)'s groundbreaking dialogue about antisemitism with our member Amy Spitalnick and Stacy Burdett. It's 30 minutes, you can Google it. You must watch it. I remain convinced that it was a turning point for American Jews. She understands, as she said, that "antisemitism, hate and violence against Jews because of their identity is real and it is dangerous." and "when the Jewish community is threatened, the progressive movement is undermined," and "Antisemitism is on the rise in America and across the world. Acknowledging that fact does not take away from fights for liberation, it actually advances them."

We have many, many more non-Jewish progressive leaders who can and must follow in AOC's footsteps, and the way they're going to do that is if we ask them directly for their help. It is easier and less emotionally risky to close ourselves off and assume that everyone hates us, to not march in the parade in case we get booed, but the courageous thing to do is to turn to our non-Jewish progressive neighbors and say, "the antisemitism is bad, we need your help." And one by one by one, they will do as AOC did, and they will start to see that all progressive movements for change are strengthened when they incorporate an understanding of antisemitism and how it works, when they build it in to their analysis about what needs to change in this country, and when they join forces with the Jewish community for a shared vision for America.

The CBE community is seeing this happen with our own eyes. This Thursday night we celebrated three years of partnership with Antioch Baptist Church in Bed Stuy. It was an exhilarating, triumphant night. Over three years, we have challenged one another directly to address racism and antisemitism. There were times when it got very difficult and painful, but we promised each other we would not walk away. And now we've made it to the other side, and the love in the room is palpable. It is overflowing. Thursday night about 70 people from our two congregations ate and sang and even danced together, and reflected on our three years, including all of the experiences of praying together and eating together, and getting into intense conversation together, and our trip together to the African American History and Culture Museum and the Holocaust Museum in

Washington, and our trip to Albany to advocate for the end of deed theft. Including making a PSA about antisemitism, directed by one of the Antioch leaders. Including a peace concert. Including our joint choir, Project Harmony, making a music video called Heal Us Now. Including a feature documentary film about our partnership which is coming out this fall in film festivals around the country.

Recently, I needed help on something big related to the city, and I didn't know who to ask. Then I realized I needed to ask Reverend Waterman, the Pastor of Antioch Baptist Church, to help me. After all of our marching together and leading together and struggling together and traveling together, you'd think picking up the phone to ask for his help would be easy. But it was not. I was embarrassed to ask. I was worried that he would feel that I was taking advantage of him, or that I was a burden. But right away, he said yes. And he made calls on my behalf. And you better believe that the next time he needs something I am so ready to be there for him. It would have been true anyway, but I hope now he feels a little more able to ask.

This is what's next. Grey and Dalia, you have given us exactly the personal challenge we all need. Get to know our negativity bias and learn to check it. Watch our resistance to asking for help and see if we can reach through it. Personally and collectively, we will all be better off if we can find that courage.

Shabbat Shalom.