

THE LETTERS OF 'NEGA' AND 'ONEG' ARE IDENTICAL

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Tazria

The Letters Of 'Nega' and 'Oneg' Are Identical

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape# 589 - Pidyon Haben - Daytime or Night? Good Shabbos!

At the end of Parshas Tazria, the Torah writes regarding the laws of Tzaraas of garments: *"The Kohen shall look after the affliction has been washed and behold! -- the affliction has not changed its appearance (haNega lo hafach es eyno) and the affliction has not spread, it is contaminated..."* [Vayikra 12:55].

The Chiddushei HaRim (the Gerer Rebbe) homiletically interprets the words "haNega lo hafach es eyno" to mean that the affliction did not change its "ayin". Many commentators point out the relationship between the word nega (spelled nun gimmel ayin), meaning affliction, and the word oneg (spelled ayin nun gimmel), meaning enjoyment. The two words are made up of identical letters. The only difference between them is where the letter ayin is placed. Is the ayin at the beginning of the word (as in oneg) or at the end of the word (as in nega)?

The point, according to the Chiddushei HaRim, is that whether something is an affliction (nega) or it is a pleasure (oneg), all depends where one places the ayin (the eye). Many things in life depend on a person's perspective. Something can happen that appears to be a blemish, an illness, an affliction. Depending on how a person views the situation, the event can be transformed. With the proper perspective and insight, a person can see this same incident as an oneg - a delight.

Chazal teach that the difference between the disciples of the wicked Bilaam and the disciples of the patriarch Avraham is that the former have an "ayin ra'ah" [evil eye] while the latter have an "ayin tovah" [a good eye]. An "ayin tova" and an "ayin ra'ah" depend strictly on a person's outlook. As we have said many times in the past, there are only two types of people in the world - those who see

the glass as half empty and those who see the glass as half full.

This is the difference between nega and oneg. When the pasuk says that the "affliction did not switch his ayin" (lo hafach haNega es ayno) , it means (homiletically) that the person's attitude did not change. The Talmud states in Tractate Eruchin that one of the reasons why Tzaraas afflicts a person is because of "tzaras ayin". Tzaras ayin is the inability of a person to look at things positively. A person who is a tzar ayin is narrow in his outlook. He looks with a jaundice eye at anyone else's success. This is what characterized the disciples of the wicked Bilaam.

The disciples of Avraham look at people generously. They have an ayin tova [good eye]. They are willing to forgive, to let the other person have success, and be happy about that success.

Tzaraas was a horrible situation. We can't even imagine it. Besides all the physical manifestations, there was great psychological humiliation associated with it. A person with tzaraas had to leave the camp.

Just imagine if this happened to us: Every time one of us spoke lashon harah [gossip], we would break out in some kind of rash. We do speak lashon harah. We do all kinds of things that we are not supposed to do. But for the most part, our sins remain between the Almighty and ourselves. We pound our breasts on Yom Kippur confessing our sins of lashon harah and they remain a private affair -- our own business!

What would it be like if every time we gossiped, blotches appeared on our face? We would not go to the dermatologist, we would go to the Kohen -- and he would sentence us to solitary confinement outside the boundaries of the city! Our friends would start asking: "Where is he? He has not come to shul. He has not come to work. What happened to him?" Eventually, word would filter back that the missing person is sitting in solitary confinement "outside the camp." It must be because he gossiped or was haughty or cheap or possessed some other character flaw of this nature. One does not sit outside the camp for good behavior! Everyone will know about it. How does one put a positive spin on this?

Allow me to cite an example of how it is possible to put a "positive spin" on being stricken with Tzaraas. Allow me to suggest an attitude in which one suffering from a nega might be able to view it as oneg.

The Talmud states: Rav Shimon bar Yochai noted: "I could excuse the entire world for all of its sins from the day I was born until now." (In other words he claimed that he was so great that any contemporary would be 'off the hook' in terms of punishment by virtue of Shimon bar Yochai's personal merit). Then to up the ante, he added "and if you include the merits of Elazar my son together with my own, we could excuse the sins of the entire world from the beginning of creation until now." Finally, he concluded, "If King Yosam son of Uziyahu were included with us, we could excuse the entire world from the beginning of time until the end of time with our combined merits." [Succah 45b]

The inclusion of Yosam son of Uziyahu seems strange. We do not normally think of him as being one of the greatest kings of all time. What is the point of mentioning him? Rashi explains that Yosam's righteousness was based on his fulfillment of the command to honor his father. He is called the "Son who respects his father" [Malachi 1:6]. He is the personification of a loyal child, the quintessential "ben yechabed av".

What did Yosam son of Uziyahu do to earn this accolade? While his father Uziyahu was in isolation as a result of having Tzaraas, Yosam served as acting monarch. All the days that Yosam ruled the country in his father's place, he never wore the crown. All the decrees he issued were issued in the name of his father. He was acting king, but without any of the accouterments of office. He took no credit for himself, but attributed all actions of the government to his father.

When Uziyahu was sitting in isolation with this painful and ugly condition all over his body and with everyone talking about the plight of their king -- what do we envision was passing through his mind at such a time?

"This is terrible. This is horrible. What good can come out of this? What positive result can emerge from the suffering I must now endure?"

And yet we see that good could emerge from such a tragedy. "You, Uziyahu, can have a son who will rise to the occasion. Through his father's illness, that son can become a tzadik [righteous person], can become an anav [humble person], can personify the commandment to honor one's parent. Through his heroic conduct during this period, Yosam can perform righteousness of historic proportions. A great deal of good can come out of your situation, King Uziyahu!"

This is how a "nega" can become "oneg". This is how a situation in which the glass is more than half empty can indeed be shown to be more than half full. Yosam became who he was because his father had Tzaraas.

Unfortunately, we at times encounter situations where a parent is infirm and incapacitated. We wonder what possible purpose can be served by this tragic situation. Sometimes the purpose is that it gives an opportunity to the child to properly honor his parent. The "nega" which the parent endures may provide a bonanza of spiritual "oneg" for the loyal offspring.

This write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah Portion. The halachic topics covered for the current week's portion in this series are:

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Transcribed by [David Twersky](#) Seattle, WA;
Technical Assistance by [Dovid Hoffman](#), Baltimore, MD

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