

Naso 5770 - Positive Reinforcement

Rabbi David Lerner

Shabbat Shalom.

Let's play name that tune.

Here's the story of a lovely lady
Who was bringing up three very lovely girls.
All of them had hair of gold, like their mother,
The youngest one in curls.

Here's the story of a man named Brady,
Who was busy with three boys of his own,
They were four men, living all together,
Yet they were all alone.

Till the one day when the lady met this fellow
And they knew it was much more than a hunch,
That this group would somehow form a family.
That's the way we all became the Brady Bunch.
The Brady Bunch,

That's the way we all became the Brady Bunch.
The Brady Bunch.

It's a really nice TV show, but what does it have to do with anything? Well, just over a week ago my wife Sharon was out at our Sisterhood's annual donor dinner, so I was watching our three kids alone. Dinner went smoothly, but it had been a long day at the shul, so I needed a break before baths and bed.

Luckily, I remembered that we had Netflixed "The Brady Bunch." I guess it was an attempt to find something a little more wholesome than what is usually broadcast on TV today. Most of today's sitcoms have references that are inappropriate for teens, let alone young children.

So, I popped in the DVD and sat back with the kids to enjoy the first episode that contains the wedding of Mike and Carol Brady, the story of how they and their six children become a family. The wedding gets disrupted by the boys' dog and the girls' cat. Mike and Carol end up yelling at their kids for all the commotion. Then they go off on a short honeymoon to a local hotel. There, they don't enjoy their time, but feel terrible about yelling at the kids and then leaving at a time of transition. So, they go and apologize to their kids and take them all to the hotel. The episode ends with the lesson of not yelling and being negative being repeated and reinforced.

Even my son Matan, who is only three, was entertained, and I appreciated the overall feel of the show, which I had not seen in some 30 years. The lesson at the end was icing on the cake.

It was getting late, so I had to hurry up with the baths, and then I remembered I had to make some phone calls, so time was short. I started to get a bit anxious, and then the kids decided it was not the time to cooperate. Before I knew it, there was clothing in the tub, water splashing all over the place, and general mayhem. I had a big mess on my hands, no kids in bed, and bedlam. I got upset and yelled at the kids.

Once things settled a bit, Talya, who is almost nine and never shy about sharing, pointed out to me that I had forgotten the lesson of the show we had all watched together: "Abba, you did not listen to the lesson from the Brady Bunch!"

She was right.

Although the lesson had been illustrated in beautiful 1969 color to me just minutes before, I had already forgotten it.

This Shabbat's Torah reading, Parashat Naso, contains the *birkat kohanim*, the Priestly benediction – our oldest blessing in our tradition, which has been found on shards of pottery dating back almost 3000 years ago in Jerusalem. It also contains the long list of gifts that the chieftains of each tribe brought to consecration of the *Mishkan*, the Tabernacle.

As Sarah commented in her *d'var* Torah, it is strange that each set of gifts is the same, but yet each is listed separately – almost 90 verses that

Sarah read skillfully. While the Torah is generally terse, here it expends a great amount of text to listing these over and over again.

Why?

Perhaps this is an important statement about positive words. The Torah reminds us that when it comes to something nice, like bringing gifts, it's OK to keep repeating them. Positive words are so precious that they can be repeated.

We see this same idea in the Ten Commandments, which we just read on Wednesday morning, the first day of Shavuot as we reenacted Sinai.

What is the third commandment?

“Lo Tisa et shem Adonai Eloheikhah Lashav – You shall not swear falsely by the name of Adonai your God.” (Exodus 20:7)

Taking God's name in vain - this always struck me as a strange mitzvah – why does God care so much about how we speak about God? After all, if God is all powerful, then God should be able to take it.

Perhaps this is a mitzvah because taking God's name in vain undermines and hurts the belief system of others. Another aspect is about the power of speech in general

It harkens back to the opening of the Torah. In the first chapter of *Bereisheet*, God creates the world – but the text does not state that God splits two atoms causing the Big Bang or starts a fire. In fact, the only action mentioned explicitly is speech. God creates the world through speech: *“Yehi or – let there be light.”*

The third commandment reminds us of the flip side of this. While the world can be created by speech, it can also be destroyed through words. Think about it – hateful actions from the Holocaust to 9-11 to trying to blow up Times Square a few weeks ago do not happen in isolation. People act after they have been infected with hateful ideas transmitted by hateful speech.

Words are the most powerful tool we have. We can create worlds, bringing more love, healing and positive energy into the world, or we can bring more negativity and destruction.

But back to my Brady Bunch moment – we sometimes need to be parents and to encourage or effect changes in behavior. As the Torah also states, “*Hokheiah Tokheih* – you should reprove;” we should help people improve, bringing them from the wrong path to the right one.

But how do we do this? How do parents do this in a loving way that encourages positive behavior? And can we bring this into our lives to make us better people, employees, partners, parents and children?

Aaron Clayton, a member of our shul who works in the field of positive reinforcement, shared with me the book, *Reaching the Animal Mind* by Karen Pryor. A dog trainer, Pryor’s all-positive clicker-training system is seen as a safe way to modify and shape behavior. Instead of criticism, positive feedback becomes the regular approach that trains animals much more effectively than other systems.

As Aaron explained to me, this is not to be confused with simply being nice or optimistic. It is first and foremost about “the conscious decision to selectively and specifically and frequently reinforce actions that you like. It teaches us to ignore what we don’t like as much as possible. Finally, we are to work at these skills until they become a habit.

These skills can be applied to human beings as well. We all need to hear positive reinforcement, and it turns out that it is a better way to effect changes in behavior.

Pryor shares the following exercise in her book that Aaron recommended, and I commend it to you:

“Here’s an exercise anyone can try.

During the day, make a point of noticing something someone else is doing that you like. Someone at work, someone at home, some stranger even. It need not be something unusual. It could be something you already expect the person to do.

At the end of the day, find time to tell the person he or she did that thing right. Avoid the word I. “I like the way you...” is all about you, not about the behavior. Just name the behavior. “It’s good that you finished your homework.” “You handled that phone call well.” “The client report is done; that’s great!” “The kitchen’s all cleaned up; that’s so nice.” Then do it again the next day, for a different behavior.

With kids, try to find one or more things that were good during the day. Don’t turn it into a big deal, just identify what the child did right. “Hey, you got down to dinner on time.” “You fed the dog on your own.” “You read to your sister; that was a good thing.” Don’t make things up at bedtime; really watch. What you are trying to train here is not the kids but your own observant eye.

This may feel weird. You may feel self-conscious. This tells you that you need practice at noticing and discussing things you like. (Do you have more experience at noticing and discussing things you don’t like? That’s true for most of us.)

Don’t expect any particular response; this may be new for the other person, too, and may take some getting used to. Just keep it up. The change in the recipients of these observations will be rapid and obvious. The change in your own [Snell’s] window on the universe will be more subtle and more profound.”

This is a great exercise, and I suggest you try it out. Feel free to try it out on me; if you liked this sermon, let me know after shul today!

Try this with your children – find something to reinforce. We live in a world where our eyes are trained to be critical and to share our negative reactions. I know that is true for me. So instead, let’s look for the positive. Sometimes, you may have to look hard for something, but keep looking.

We should do this for things that we take for granted as well. Maybe if you’re a child, your parents make dinner every night and you take that for granted – don’t. You should try to appreciate what each person in your home or family does. This can transform your home, your relationships, our community.

Our rabbis were aware of this. Avtalyon warned us to be careful with our words and Shammai taught: *Havei mekabel et kol ha-adam b'seiver panim yafot* - to greet each person with a cheerful face, with a smile, with positive words and energy.

There is a custom to begin each day, before we pray, with a simple reminder of that. You can find it on page 63 of our Siddur, added by Rabbi Isaac Luria, the great 16th century mystic: *Hareini Mekabel alai mitzvah habore – v'ahavta l'reiakha kamokha* – I hereby accept the obligation of fulfilling my Creator's mitzvah in the Torah: Love your neighbor as yourself. By accepting this mitzvah each morning, we are reminded about how to relate to each person and every interaction we have in the day.

After that line, our prayer book continues with a litany of praise for our Creator; this becomes the paradigm for all our relationships. We are to approach others with love, with praise. It is the routine we do every morning as Jews to remind us to bring that positive reinforcement, that positive energy, into the way we speak with others.

Even though the Brady Bunch made it look easy, it is a life's work.

May we be blessed to bring it more fully into our lives. Amen.

Shabbat Shalom.