

Let's try an experiment. Finish these song lyrics, if you can:

If you're happy and you know it (clap your hands).

You've got to accentuate the positive (eliminate the negative).

Just whistle while you work (and cheerfully, together we can tidy up the place).

Yeah, it might be all that you get (Yeah, I guess this might well be it).

Sí se puede (Yes we can).

Whether you are a fan of the 1944 Harold Arlen and Johnny Mercer song, *The Seven Dwarfs*, *Ted Lasso*—or a simple daily aspirational message in your inbox—there is little doubt that having a positive attitude is a key to success, to making progress and to just being happy in life.

That's not to say that we all can go through life whistling away our problems or having a perpetually sunny disposition, come what may. I think we all want to bop such people on the head for being so ingratiating. Neither, however, can we go through life as a misanthrope, fearing what lurks behind every corner and that any minute now the sky will be falling.

Though either approach acknowledges that in the end, much in this life is out of our hands; the truth of the human condition is that we embody both extremes at some times in our lives and spend much of our days somewhere in between. The power to improve how we feel about the conditions of our lives is in our own hands, in how we perceive the world around us and how we speak about it.

In this week's Torah portion, Sh'lach, The Eternal demonstrates this for the Children of Israel.

שְׁלַח-לְךָ אַנְשִׁים וַיְתַרְוּ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ כַּנֶּזֶעַן אֲשֶׁר-אָגַד נָתַן לְבַנְיָיִשׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל אִישׁ אֶחָד אִישׁ אֶחָד לְמִטָּה אַבְתָּיִרוֹ תִשְׁלְחוּ כָל נְשִׂיאֵי בְהֵמָה:

When Moses sent them to scout the land of Canaan, he said to them: “Go up there into the Negeb and on into the hill country,

וּרְאִיתֶם אֶת-הָאָרֶץ מֵהַהָרָה וְאֶת-הָעָם הַיֹּשֵׁב עָלֶיהָ הֲחֹזֵק הוּא הֲרַפָּה הֲמַעֲט הוּא אִם-רַב:
and see what kind of country it is. Are the people who dwell in it strong or weak, few or many?

וּמָה הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר-הוּא יֹשֵׁב בָּהּ הֲטוֹבָה הוּא אִם-רָעָה וּמָה הָעָרִים הֲיֹשֵׁב בְּהִנָּהּ הֲבִמְצֻרִים אִם בְּמִבְצָרִים:
Is the country in which they dwell good or bad? Are the towns they live in open or fortified?

וּמָה הָאֲדָמָה הַשְּׂמֵנָה הוּא אִם-רְזָה הֲגִשְׂמָה עַל אִם-אִיוֹ וְהִתְחַזְּקֶתֶם וְלִקְחֶתֶם מִפְּרֵי הָאָרֶץ וְהִנְיָמִים מִי בִפְנֵי עֵנָבִים:
Is the soil rich or poor? Is it wooded or not? And take pains to bring back some of the fruit of the land.” Now it happened to be the season of the first ripe grapes.

וַיַּעֲלוּ וַיְתַרְוּ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ מִמִּדְבַּר-זִין עַד-רְחֹב לְבָא חַמָּת:
They went up and scouted the land, from the wilderness of Zin to Rehob, at Lebo-hamath.

וַיַּעֲלוּ בְּצִבְיָהּ וַיָּבֹאוּ עַד-חֶבְרוֹן וְשָׁם אַחִימָן וְשֶׁשַׁי וְתַלְמַי יְלִידֵי הָעֵגְלָה וְחֶבְרוֹן שָׁבַע שָׁנִים נִבְנְתָה לְפָנָי צֵעַן מֵאֲרָיִם:
They went up into the Negeb and came to Hebron, where lived Ahiman, Sheshai and Talmai, the Anakites.

Now Hebron was founded seven years before Zoan of Egypt.

וַיָּבֹאוּ עַד-גִּזְלָה אֲשֶׁלֶל וַיִּכְרְתוּ מִשָּׁם זְמוּרָה וְאֲשֶׁפֹל עֲנָבִים אֶחָד וַיִּשְׂאֶהוּ בְמוֹט בְּשֶׁגְגִים וּמִן-הָרְמָנִים וּמִן-הַתְּאֵנִים:

They reached the wadi Eshcol, and there they cut down a branch with a single cluster of grapes—it had to be borne on a carrying frame by two of them—and some pomegranates and figs.

לְמָקוֹם הַהוּא קָרָא גִזְלָה אֲשֶׁפֹל עַל אֲדוֹת הָאֲשֶׁפֹל אֲשֶׁר-כָּרְתוּ מִשָּׁם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:
That place was named the wadi Eshcol because of the cluster that the Israelites cut down there.

וַיָּשֻׁבוּ מִתֵּיִר הָאָרֶץ מִקֵּץ אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם:

At the end of forty days they returned from scouting the land.

וַיָּלְכוּ וַיְבִאוּ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל־אַהֲרֹן וְאֶל־כָּל־עֵדֶת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־מִדְבַּר פָּאֲרָן קַדֶּשׁ וַיֹּשִׁיבוּ אֲתָם דְּבַר וְאֶת־כָּל־הָעֵדָה וַיֵּרְאוּם אֶת־פְּרֵי הָאָרֶץ:
They went straight to Moses and Aaron and the whole Israelite community at Kadesh in the wilderness of Paran, and they made their report to them and to the whole community, as they showed them the fruit of the land.

וַיֹּסְרוּלוֹ וַיֹּאמְרוּ כָּאֲנוּ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר שְׁלַחְתֶּנּוּ וְגַם זָבַת חֶלֶב וּדְבַשׁ הִוא וְזֶה־פְרִיָּהּ:
This is what they told him: “We came to the land you sent us to; it does indeed flow with milk and honey, and this is its fruit.

אָפֶס כִּי־עַז הָעַם הַיֹּשֵׁב בְּאֶרֶץ וְהָעָרִים בְּצָרוֹת גְּדֹלֹת מְאֹד וְגַם־יְלֵדֵי הָעַגְמָק רָאִינוּ שָׁם:
However, the people who inhabit the country are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large; moreover, we saw the Anakites there.

עַמְלֶק יֹשֵׁב בְּאֶרֶץ הַנֶּגֶב וְהַחִתִּי וְהַיְבוֹסִי וְהָאֱמֹרִי יֹשֵׁב בְּהָר וְהַכְּנַעֲנִי יֹשֵׁב עַל־הַיַּם וְעַל יַד הַיַּרְדֵּן:
Amalekites dwell in the Negeb region; Hittites, Jebusites and Amorites inhabit the hill country; and Canaanites dwell by the Sea and along the Jordan.”

וַיהִס כָּלֵב אֶת־הָעָם אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר עֲלֵה נַעֲלֵה וַיִּרְשָׁנוּ אֹתָהּ כִּי־יָכוֹל נוֹכַח לָהּ:
Caleb hushed the people before Moses and said, “Let us by all means go up, and we shall gain possession of it, for we shall surely overcome it.”

“*Ki yachol nuchal na.*” “Surely we can do it,” says Caleb.

But the other men who had gone up with him said, “We cannot attack that people, for it is stronger than we.” Thus they spread calumnies among the Israelites about the land they had scouted, saying, “The country that we traversed and scouted is one that devours its settlers. All the people that we saw in it are of great size; we saw the Nephilim there—the Anakites are part of the Nephilim—and we looked like grasshoppers to ourselves, and so we must have looked to them.”

Normally, the act of doing something gives one the confidence to repeat it. That’s the “can do” spirit that comes with practice and experience. We’re encouraged when we realize we are capable of something and we want to do it more. It’s the doing of something that makes the difference. That’s why so much of Jewish tradition surrounds fulfilling commandments, *mitzvot*. It’s what we do that makes us who we are. We are defined by our acts.

Sometimes, though, it’s *how* we do things that reflects our truest selves and our impact on the world. It is enough to let the car on the corner to your right to pass in front of you at the stop sign—this is the law. To send them along with a friendly wave, while a seemingly small touch, elevates the act.

In our tradition, it is enough to do a *mitzvah*, such as, say, placing a box containing certain scriptural passages on one’s doorpost. We do, however, aim to beautify the act, *Hiddur Mitzvah*, by selecting a lovely *mezuzah* to adorn the entryways to our homes or offices.

So, too, it is with our attitudes. *Si se puede*. Yes we can. *Ki yachol nuchal na*. Thus, we come to understand Psalm 100:2:

עֲבֹדוּ אֶת־ה' בְּשִׂמְחָה בְּאוֹ לִפְנֵי בְּרִנָּה. *Ivdu et Adonai b'simcha, bo'u l'fanav bir'nana.*

Serve God with happiness, come before Him with joy.

Returning to the *M'raglim*, those princes of the people who report back to Moses collectively seem to affirm that the land is indeed good, flowing with milk and honey. Ten of them, however, are concerned about the inhabitants of the land, their cities, their perceived strength and even their size. “In our eyes, we seemed like grasshoppers and so we must have seemed to them.”

Nobody has asked about this—it is merely an assumption based in fear and doubt. What follows is nothing short of a disaster. Confronted with conflicting reports, the Children of Israel panic turn on Moses and Aaron. They wail. “If only we would die in the wilderness. If only we had died in Egypt! Let us head back there.”

What is happening? Why would they want to return to the place of their captivity and degradation?

Though Moses appeals to The Eternal to have compassion, “*Adonai, Adonai, El rachum v'chanun, erech apayim v'rav hesed v'emet*”; “My Lord, My God, merciful and compassionate and endlessly kind,” The Eternal has had enough. The people are not ready, God determines; they will wander the wilderness for 40 years until the generation that knew Egypt passes from the earth, save for the two scouts, Caleb and Joshua, who encouraged the people that they could do it.

Tradition teaches that this wandering for 40 years is the price our ancestors paid for insulting the land, for giving a bad report. But the truth is they praise the land. They bring back proof of its goodness, the massive grapes and milk and honey.

The bad report is about their own fears, their negativity. Why do they wish to return to the place of their enslavement? Because mentally, spiritually, they were still slaves. They were in the narrow-minded Mitzrayim mindset. It wasn't a negative report, it was a negative mindset.

Many of you know our fellow congregant Mickey Feher and his company, Purpose and Company. He just coauthored a book I encourage you to read called *The Power of Mindset Change: Why Mindset Matters Most*.

The generation of Israelites that came out of Egypt, who incessantly kvetched about food, water, the lack of decent bagels and how lousy the Mets were doing, weren't ready. They were free, but they were still slaves—slaves to fear, to negativity and to the past.

They couldn't envision overcoming the obstacles to fulfill their destiny, to venture forth boldly into the future. They are so afraid of change, of their own success, they'd rather the community wither away than take action and seize their fate.

But we know this. How many of us would rather stick with what we know, with what we've always done? It's easier. We can rewatch what's in our Netflix cue, or we can go out and do that thing we have been avoiding for the last several weeks, months or years. Yes, we can—or, perhaps, next year—or in 40 years.

Is it better to stay in the wilderness, wandering, stuck in the past for fear of our future? Beyond our fear of change getting the best of us, we sometimes do worse. Sometimes, we attack the agents of change trying to help us march forward into the future. The children of Israel did so, setting upon Moses and Aaron.

How many of us have attacked people trying to help us get out of a rut, change a behavior or maybe even some aspect of communal practice? Maybe it's to stop eating that thing that we know isn't good for us, but maybe it's how we constantly kvetch, or how we blame others or undermine those who only want to help us.

The term “flame-wars” was coined to describe how people interacted on electronic discussion boards, escalating critical, mostly negative comments toward one another. Anyone with access to the Internet knows that our behavior on Facebook, YouTube and Twitter hasn't improved. Sherry Turkle, PhD, a psychologist and professor at MIT, conducted hundreds of interviews over 15 years and found that “we allow ourselves behaviors online we never would in person.”

But it is clear now that those behaviors are now permissible and common in our society. The acerbic, acrimonious way people engage with one another is less dialogue than diatribe. We don't want to hear or discuss with those with whom we disagree but rather destroy them.

In last week's Torah portion Beha'alotcha, some people begin complaining on the edge of the camp, and as a result a deadly fire breaks out. But like fire, negativity spreads easily and the destruction it brings soon comes to the center of the camp. Complaints about diet and returning to Egypt undermine Moses's authority. These people are so fearful of the future that they return in their minds to the past. Despite the harshness of slavery, they return to it in their minds because what they know is more comfortable than what lies ahead. Faith in the future, in fulfillment of their redemption and their purpose is not possible because of the negativity lurking in their minds.

It's sinister of those scouts giving the report with a negative attitude. That's how they sap the community of its confidence and undermine its leaders. They don't have the community's interests at heart, but rather their own. We know this, because in just a couple weeks this very phenomenon builds to a crescendo with the logical rise of Korach, a cousin of Moses who challenges his leadership and divides the Israelites for his own nefarious purposes. But in this week's portion, in the rising action, or inaction, as it were, we see where the ancient flame war has led. Nobody is happy.

Why is it so hard to change our mindset and overcome the negativity standing in the way of our being happy, healthy and fulfilling our destiny?

It's because we aren't alone in it. Mindsets and attitudes are infectious. When we speak from a place of fear and suspicion, it doesn't just affect us—negativity spreads like a virus. It makes a community weak, frail and afraid to take decisive action at the very moment it matters most. Rather than staking a claim to a vision for the future, the Israelites falter in their faith not just in God but in themselves.

“When the negative voices in our community start to make noise, it pulls us away from our purpose and each other. ... Pretty soon people start believing what's the loudest rather than searching for what's possible,” says Paula Jensen, a community development strategist.

Communal purpose and responsibility fall apart when individuals seize on a community's fear for their own purposes and anchor it to the motionless past. Will we follow their bad example, or will we take the opposite tack and follow Caleb and Joshua?

I'm reminded of growing up in my hometown of Deerfield, Illinois, which once was the headquarters of the baking company Sara Lee Corporation. When the wind was blowing in just the right way, the entire town smelled like pound cake. And when it shifted just a little, we got the village sanitation plant instead. The slight shift of the wind, or our minds, is the difference between what smells so sweet or what smells so bad.

We humans are sensitive to one another's experiences and emotions. Empathy is so very powerful because we don't just relate to someone else's experiences, we share their emotional responses as well.

It's why when we watch cute videos of babies or puppies we swoon and click "like." It's why political rallies, pep talks and even Divrei Torah are so effective. It's why we love *Ted Lasso* and why Joshua's impassioned speech foretells his rise and assumption of Moses's role—because his relentless positivity makes him a natural leader while the other scouts, all princes of their tribes, are named yet soon forgotten.

Like him, our words have power, as well, beyond our deeds. The Hasidic master Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, citing Psalm 100 that we are to serve Adonai with *simcha* or joy, taught *Mitzvah Gedolah Lihiyot B'simcha*—that it is a great *mitzvah* to be happy. And, therefore, if we should find ourselves unhappy, it is our responsibility to seek out things that bring us joy and do them. Thus, we can become happy and, in doing that alone, serve God. It seems simple enough, but I think we all realize that it can be harder than it seems.

The song says: "If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands," not just "if you're happy." It takes self-awareness and reflection to do that children's song right. So, do we use our energies to wallow in the past and in our misery, or do we use it to move forward into that promised land?

Do we maximize our personal and communal potential; or do we stay in the *midbar*, sticking our heads in the proverbial sand, hoping God alone will deliver us—or that it would be better to turn tail and run, long for the past in good old Egypt?

It seems to me the faith The Eternal demands from us isn't just in letting time pass but in seizing what time we have and doing what we can to make the most of it. *Ki yachol nochal na*. If each of us does it, we will spread our positive attitude like pound cake.

Surely, we can do it. It's in our hands. So, if you're happy and you know it...

Shabbat Shalom.