

5781 – Deuteronomy 11-26 – Re'eh (See)

*Here's One Time You Should NOT Think Positively*¹

Optimism and positivity.

That's the Torah's approach to how we should view almost every circumstance. We try to see the glass as half full, rather than half-empty.

Even during trying times, we highlight what we have rather than what is lacking, and all that we need to be grateful for, as opposed to focusing on our wants and needs.

On a psychological level, this approach is very beneficial. The more we emphasize our gratitude, the more positive we become as people. As I heard from one motivational instructor, "It's not that happy people are thankful, it's that thankful people are happy."

But on a spiritual level, this approach is even more powerful. Positive thinking can actually change our reality in a significant way.

"Think good, and it will be good" is a popular Chasidic saying, which means that positive thoughts create a positive reality. When we open the channels of our faith in G-d by trusting Him to create a good outcome, we generate what we are hoping for. By believing that G-d is infinite, able to provide for us in a way that we perceive as positive, G-d reciprocates and directs that positive reality into our lives.

Even if things get so bad and we don't see those positive outcomes—and we see no seed of goodness in our suffering—we assure ourselves with our faith. "All that G-d does is ultimately for our own good" we tell ourselves, even if we can't currently comprehend how that is so.

But there's one time when this attitude just does not work. Moreover, not only is it not praiseworthy to be positive, it is actually downright destructive.

That is when it comes to others.

Never look at the suffering of another person and think, "Well, at least he has something good in his life to be grateful for." Similarly, thoughts like, "This was meant to be" or, "All is for the good" is completely out of place when it comes to another person.

When you see someone suffering, it is downright cruel to think that this individual has been given a test in order to strengthen him or help her become a better person. Our job is not to philosophically come to terms with another's pain, but to alleviate it.

This week's Torah portion, Re'eh speaks about the commandment of charity.

If there will be among you a needy person, from one of your brothers in one of your cities ... you shall not harden your heart, and you shall not close your hand from your needy brother.

Rather, open, *open your hand to him*, and you shall lend him sufficient for his needs, which he is lacking ...

You shall surely give him, and your heart shall not be grieved when you give to him; for because of this thing G-d will bless you in all your work and in all your endeavors.—DEUTERONOMY 15:7-9

The Talmud (Bava Batra [The Last Gate] 10a) comments: "Rabbi Elazar would give a coin to a pauper, and only then would he pray."

So, the Torah's approach is this: The next time you see someone suffering, drop the smugly righteous "It's all good" mantra. **Instead, roll up your sleeves and see what you can do to help.**

1. *Even during trying times, we highlight what we have rather than what is lacking, and all that we need to be grateful for, as opposed to focusing on our wants and needs.*

a. Psalm 100:1-5 (cf. Psa 147:7)

¹A psalm. **For giving grateful praise.** Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth. ²**Worship the LORD with gladness;** come before him with joyful songs. ³Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture. ⁴**Enter his gates with thanksgiving** and his courts with praise; **give thanks to him** and praise his name. ⁵For the LORD is good and **his love endures forever;** his faithfulness continues through all generations.

JPS—A Psalm of **thanksgiving.**

b. Jonah 2:7-10

⁷**When my life was ebbing away,** I remembered you, LORD, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple. ⁸Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God's love for them. ⁹But I, **with shouts of grateful praise,** will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. I will say, 'Salvation comes from the LORD.'" ¹⁰And the LORD commanded the fish, and **it vomited Jonah onto dry land.**

c. Colossians 2:6-7

⁶So then, just as you received Messiah Yeshua as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, ⁷rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and **overflowing with thankfulness.**

1) Colossians 3:15

¹⁵Let the peace of Messiah rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. **And be thankful.**

¹ Chana Weisberg, *Shabbat deLights, Vayikra/Bamidbar/Devarim*, (chabad.org), pp. 243-245.

2) Colossians 4:2

²Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful **and thankful**.

d. Hebrews 12:28-29

²⁸Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, **let us be thankful**, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, ²⁹for our "God is a consuming fire."

e. Leviticus 7:11-12

¹¹"These are the regulations for the fellowship offering anyone may present to the LORD: ¹²"If they offer it **as an expression of thankfulness, then along with this thank offering** they are to offer thick loaves made without yeast and with olive oil mixed in, thin loaves made without yeast and brushed with oil, and thick loaves of the finest flour well-kneaded and with oil mixed in.

2. ... *on a spiritual level, this approach is even more powerful. Positive thinking can actually change our reality in a significant way.*

a. Good Thinking by Yanki Tauber²

It was the custom of Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi to officiate as the reader of the weekly Torah reading in his synagogue. One year, the rebbe was away from home on the Shabbat on which the section of Ki Tavo (Deuteronomy 26-29) is read. In the rebbe's absence, someone else did the reading.

Ki Tavo contains the "Rebuke," a harsh description of the calamities or "curses" destined to befall the Jewish people should they forsake the commandments of the Torah. That week, Rabbi Schneur Zalman's son, DovBer, who was about twelve years old at the time, was so affected by the "curses" of the Rebuke that he developed a heart ailment. Three weeks later, when Yom Kippur came around, he was still so weak that his father was hesitant to allow him to fast.

When the young DovBer was asked, "But don't you hear the Rebuke every year?" he replied: "When Father reads, one does not hear curses."

A recent *New York Times* article reported on a group of psychologists who are chafing under what they call the "tyranny of the positive attitude." For several years now, positive thinking has been in vogue. But these good doctors are "worried that we're not making space for people to feel bad" **and feel that a reversal of this trend is in order**. There's been a symposium ("The Overlooked Virtues of Negativity"), a book (*Stop Smiling, Start Kvetching*), and a push to

get psychologists back to doing what they're supposed to be doing, which is to "focus on mental illness and human failing."

If the cyclical nature of cultural trends in recent times is any indication, these guys are on to something big. Soon we'll be seeing *Start Kvetching* climbing the best-seller lists, to the sound of smiley stickers being scraped off car windows across the country.

I take comfort in the fact that the Torah's attitude, which predates today's positivist trend by four thousand years and will survive it by much longer than that, is one of unabashed optimism. **This is the doctrine of *bitachon*, or trust in G-d**, which the chassidic master Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch (1789-1866) distilled as the Yiddish adage, *Tracht gut, vet zein gut*—"Think good, and it will be good."

What this means, says the Lubavitcher Rebbe, **is that *bitachon*, the absolute assurance and conviction that G-d will make things good, actually becomes the conduit and vessel which draw down and receive G-d's blessings**. Positive thinking is not just a way to weather negative occurrences, but actually makes positive results happen.

I can't tell you that I fully understand how this works. I can't even tell you that it has worked for me. But the indomitable optimism of the Jew has been around for so long, and has been refuted so many times only to survive and blossom, that no personal testimony can possibly add to or detract from it.

Trust G-d; it works. If you do, it will.

b. Romans 8:26-31 (CJB)

²⁶Similarly, the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we don't know how to pray the way we should. But the Spirit himself pleads on our behalf with groanings too deep for words; ²⁷and the one who searches hearts knows exactly what the Spirit is thinking, because his pleadings for God's people accord with God's will.

²⁸Furthermore, we know that **God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called in accordance with his purpose**; ²⁹because those whom he knew in advance, he also determined in advance would be conformed to the pattern of his Son, so that he might be the firstborn among many brothers; ³⁰and those whom he thus determined in advance, he also called; and those whom he called, he also caused to be considered righteous; and those whom he caused to be considered righteous he also glorified!

³¹What, then, are we to say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ...

² https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/2492/jewish/Good-Thinking.htm

c. “Positive thinking” is not *pretending* that things are good when they are not—or thinking of “faith” as something that energizes a process whereby God has an obligation to give us something that we intend to “spend ... on our pleasures” (James 4:3).

1) Positive thinking, or an optimistic attitude, is the practice of **focusing on the good in any given situation**. It can have a big impact on your physical and mental health.³

That doesn't mean you ignore reality or make light of problems. It simply means **you approach the good and the bad in life with the expectation that things will go well.**

The Benefits of Positive Thinking

Many studies have looked at the role of optimism and positive thinking in mental and physical health. It's not always clear which comes first: the mindset or these benefits. But there is no downside to staying upbeat.

Some physical benefits may include:

- Longer life span
- Lower chance of having a heart attack
- Better physical health
- Greater resistance to illness such as the common cold
- Lower blood pressure
- Better stress management
- Better pain tolerance

The mental benefits may include:

- More creativity
- Greater problem-solving skill
- Clearer thinking
- Better mood
- Better coping skills
- Less depression

3. *Never look at the suffering of another person and think, “Well, at least he has something good in his life to be grateful for.” Similarly, thoughts like, “This was meant to be” or, “All is for the good” is completely out of place when it comes to another person.*

a. Ecclesiastes 3:1-9

¹There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens: ²a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, ³a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build, ⁴**a time to weep and a time to**

laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance, ⁵a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them, a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing, ⁶a time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to throw away, ⁷a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak, ⁸a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace. ⁹What do workers gain from their toil?

1) Romans 12:14-18

¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.

⁵**Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.** ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. ¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. ¹⁸If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

4. *When you see someone suffering, it is downright cruel to think that this individual has been given a test in order to strengthen him or help her become a better person. **Our job is not to philosophically come to terms with another's pain, but to alleviate it.***

a. Leviticus 25:35-38

³⁵“If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and are unable to support themselves among you, **help them** as you would a foreigner and stranger, so they can continue to live among you.

³⁶Do not take interest or any profit from them, but fear your God, so that they may continue to live among you. ³⁷You must not lend them money at interest or sell them food at a profit. ³⁸I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan and to be your God.

b. Deuteronomy 15:7-8

⁷If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the LORD your God is giving you, **do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them.** ⁸Rather, **be open-handed and freely lend them whatever they need.**

c. Matthew 25:31-46

³¹“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. ³⁴“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵**For I was hungry and you**

³ <https://www.webmd.com/mental-health/positive-thinking-overview>

gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' ³⁷"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry ... or thirsty ...?' ³⁸When did we see you a stranger ... or needing clothes ...?' ³⁹When did we see you sick or in prison ...?' ⁴⁰"The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, **whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me'** ...

1) Psalm 146:5-9

⁵Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God. ⁶He is the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them—he remains faithful forever. ⁷**He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry.** The LORD sets prisoners free, ⁸the LORD gives sight to the blind, **the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down**, the LORD loves the righteous. ⁹**The LORD watches over the foreigner and sustains the fatherless and the widow**, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.

2) 2Enoch⁴ 9:1 (OTP)

¹This place, O Enoch, is prepared for the righteous, who endure all manner of offence from those that exasperate their souls, who avert their eyes from iniquity, and make righteous judgement, and **give bread to the hungry, and cover the naked with clothing, and raise up the fallen, and help injured orphans**, and who walk without fault before the face of the Lord, and serve him alone, and for them is prepared this place for eternal inheritance ...

d. Acts 20:33-35

³³I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. ³⁴You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. ³⁵In everything I did, **I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must**

help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Yeshua himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

e. Galatians 6:2

²Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Messiah.

f. Ephesians 4:32

³²**Be kind and compassionate to one another**, forgiving each other, just as in Messiah God forgave you.

1) Abraham Joshua Heschel⁵

"When I was young, I used to admire intelligent people; as I grow older, I admire kind people."

g. 1John 3:17-18

¹⁷If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need **but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person?** ¹⁸Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

⁴ *Second Enoch*, or the *Slavonic Apocalypse of Enoch*, was written late in the first century CE in Egypt by a Jew. It survives only in late Old Slavonic manuscripts. It may have been composed originally in Aramaic or Hebrew, later being translated into Greek, and later still being translated into Old Slavonic. It is an amplification of Gen 5:21-32 (from Enoch to the Flood). Major theological themes include: (1) God created the world "out of nothing" (24:2); (2) seven heavens (30:2-3) and angelic hosts; (3) God created the souls of men before the foundation of the earth (23:5); (4) abodes of heaven and hell are already prepared for righteous and sinners; and (5) ethical teachings, which at times parallel those of the (Apostolic Writings) and Proverbs—Craig A. Evans, *Ancient Texts for New Testament Studies*, (Hendrickson Publishers), p. 30.

⁵ Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–1972) was a Polish-born American rabbi and one of the leading Jewish theologians and Jewish philosophers of the 20th century. Heschel, a professor of Jewish mysticism at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, authored a number of widely read books on Jewish philosophy and was a leader in the civil rights movement. Among the books he authored: *Man is Not Alone*, *The Sabbath and God in Search of Man*.