

Good Thinking

By: Rabbi Yanki Tauber

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 that 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 round, 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 the 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 Chassidic master Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch (1789-1866) distilled as the Yiddish adage, *Tracht gutt, vet zein gutt*--"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 happen positive results.

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.

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Parashat Behar-Bechukotai

Shabbat Begins: 8:19 pm

Shabbat Ends: 9:31 pm