

THE POWER OF NEGATIVE THINKING
Parshat Shelach Lecha
by Rabbi Alan B. Lucas
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My kids always make fun of me and criticize that I tend to look at everything that happens in the world through a Jewish lens. I usually respond defensively to this criticism but in truth – for a rabbi, I suppose it is not the worst criticism in the world.

So you can imagine how I reacted to the news that on National TV, this past Thursday night, that Arvind V. Mahankali, an eighth grader at Nathaniel Hawthorne Middle School in Bayside, Queens, won the Scripps Spelling Bee by correctly spelling: “knaidel.” In reporting this, the New York Times had to explain what a knaidel was – I do not believe that is necessary for me to do so here this morning.

And I was left with my Jewish reading of the news to try and decipher if this was a good news story or a sad news story.

Good news – we Jews are so integrated into American society and such a part of American culture that terms like “knaidel” have become regular and accepted parts of the English language. It is hard to turn on the TV and not hear people who are clearly not Jewish, sprinkle their talk with words like, chutzpah or schmooze.

So what is the bad news part of this story – from a Jewish perspective? Well, the 13 year old who won the spelling bee was named Arvind V. Mahankali and the runner up was Pranav Sivakumar. Good for them. But I remember a time when it was Jewish named children, like Schwartz and Cohen, who were winning the Spelling Bees – spelling exotic Indian or Scandinavian words – now we are nowhere to be found – but they are spelling our words. Should I be optimistic or pessimistic about these results?

In today’s torah reading, *Shelach Lecha*, we once again read the episode of the spies who were sent out to survey the land and report back regarding how easy or difficult it would be for the new nation to conquer their new land. We get two reports about the land of Israel. One is positive, the other negative. Two groups look at the same place and one sees its possibilities, the other, its problems. And the question I raise from today’s Torah portion and from my dilemma with the Spelling Bee is how are we to go through life? So often we are confronted by data that can be read in a positive light or in a negative one. If we look with negativity, we find reasons to be negative. If we look with eyes of faith, we find reasons to be optimistic.

I have recently been called upon by our leadership here at Temple Beth Sholom to respond to the challenges confronting the contemporary synagogue. Never has the challenge been greater to the institution of the synagogue. A perfect storm of demographic challenges, economic challenges and social challenges has resulted in making it difficult for synagogues to survive. And so I was asked to survey the data and make some suggestions of how we could proceed and where we should go from here.

As I began this process I heard one of our financial officers quip that the rabbi is the last person that they should ask to undertake this task. "Rabbis," he suggested, "are hopelessly positive! Every time I go to shul, all I hear the rabbi talking about is the importance of being positive. If we want a more meaningful report, we should have it done by someone who appreciates the value of being negative." And I thought a lot about his concern and concluded he was correct. Even though ten of the twelve spies were negative, no one ever speaks out in favor of negativity. Thousands of years of Rabbinic sermons have given all the credit to the two positive spies, to Joshua and Caleb. And I realized this was not fair. So this morning I would like to take just a few moments to pay tribute to the power of negative thinking!

People are always telling the story of the little engine that huffed and puffed its way up the mountain, saying, "I think I can, I think I can." And that story has influenced who knows how many generations of children to think positively instead of negatively.

Did you read about that bridge that collapsed in Washington State? Well maybe if people had been a little less optimistic, had a little less faith, they would have replaced it or repaired it a long time ago. How about the tragedy of those children killed by a tornado in Kansas? Maybe a little less optimism and a little more pessimism about what could happen in the world would have resulted in their building their schools with a basement!

Some say we worry too much about climate change, nuclear holocaust, pesticide poisoning – I say maybe we don't worry enough. And if these are not enough examples of things to worry about let me give you a few more: Consider what some scientists predict.

"If everyone keeps stacking National Geographics in their garages and attics instead of throwing them away, the magazine's weight will sink the continent a hundred feet some time soon and we will all be inundated by the oceans.

"If the number of microscope specimen slides submitted to one St. Louis Hospital Laboratory continue to increase at the current rate, that metropolis will be buried under three feet of glass by the year 2324.

"If beachgoers keep returning home with as much sand clinging to them as they do now, eighty percent of the country's coastline will disappear in ten years.

"Hard to believe? Scientists have the statistics and formulas to prove all this. They have even published them. Welcome to the Journal of Irreproducible Results, the official publication of the Society for Basic Irreproducible Results. They have a website at www.jir.com and you can purchase "The best of the Journal of Irreducible Results" from Amazon.com. The general public may not know about the journal, but many scientists do. Published for over 50 years now, (the first one was published by Harry Lipkin in Ness Ziona, Israel in 1955) written and edited by scientists, the journal has 40,000 subscribers in 52 countries. Several articles over the years have achieved the status of legend.

"For example, in 'Pickle and Its Consequences,' the journal reported the striking discovery that pickles cause cancer, Communism, airline tragedies, auto accidents and crime waves. Proof? About 99% of cancer victims have eaten pickles at some time in their lives or are descended from someone who has. So have 100% of all soldiers who die in battle and 99.75% of all those

involved in car accidents. Moreover, those born in 1839 who ate pickles had a 100% mortality rate and rats who were force-fed 25 pounds of pickles a day for a month all ended up with bulging abdomens and loss of appetite.

"By far, the most famous article the journal has published is, 'The National Geographic As A Doomsday Machine.' This article pointed out that more than 6.8 million issues of the National Geographic, each weighing two pounds, are sent to subscribers each month and that not one copy has been thrown away since publication began 141 years ago. Instead, copies are accumulating in basements, attics, in libraries, etc. . . . Soon, the geologic substructure of the country will no longer be able to support this load, the article predicted. Some subsidence will occur, rock formations will compress, great faults will appear, the continent will eventually begin to sink and be inundated by the seas. In fact, the increased earthquake activity in California along the San Andreas Fault that has already occurred was probably triggered by population growth in the state, the article said, with the concomitant increase in National Geographic subscriptions. The article ended by calling for nothing less than the immediate halt to publication of the National Geographic by congressional action or Presidential edict. "We are aware that purists may be concerned about the freedom to publish, but if the continent is in danger, as we negativists believe, surely a detail like that cannot be allowed to stand in the way of human safety."

The humor upon which this journal is based is in that it exploits the most common error in scientific thinking. This error is based on what scientists do best - that is observe certain phenomenon and combines it with what scientist do worst - that is project into the future - making assumptions based on their accurate observations of the present. It is an incontrovertible fact that *if* the number of microscope specimen slides submitted to one St. Louis Hospital Laboratory continues to increase at the current rate that catastrophic things might happen. The fallacy in the calculation is that things will *not* continue to increase at that rate.

When I was 16 years old I was growing taller at quite a rapid rate - I was also losing weight. I calculated that if things continued as they were by the time I was 50, I would be 10 feet tall and not weigh anything. As you can clearly see that did not happen. Why? Because all those predictions based on assumptions that things will continue in a certain way rarely continue that way.

One of the reasons it is so hard to predict the future is that the present itself is so unpredictable. And, so you choose your assumptions and your predictions will pretty much work out in accordance. Dire assumptions produce dire predictions.

Since the Palestinians will never change in their hatred for the Jewish people there is no chance that peace will succeed. That is certainly true *if* the Palestinians do not change. But a whole lot of Jewish history over the last 4,000 years has been written by our knack for confounding the predictions and achieving the unachievable.

So, truth be told, there is much to be pessimistic about, much to be negative about, much to fear in our contemporary world. As we discuss the future of the synagogue or a host of other important subjects like the future of marriage, or health care, or the state of politics in our

country, I beg you, whatever you do, don't listen to the Torah portion this Shabbat, and *please* don't listen to the *Haftarah*. The *Haftarah* is a story of how fear and pessimism turned out to be misguided and how those who were afraid of the inhabitants of the Promised Land found out, when they got there a generation later, that *those* people were afraid of *them*. Please, on behalf of all the pessimists in the world, I beseech you; don't listen to this Haftarah, which is a song of faith to the ability of human beings, with God's help, to confound predictions of inevitable doom.

Just think; if our ancestors had only followed the teachings of negative thinking, we would not be worrying about how to deal with all the problems of contemporary America like terrorism, the up and down stock market, assimilation and our brothers and sisters in Israel would never have had to deal with the problems of the Palestinians or how to establish a State that deals with religious tolerance or even how to cope with desert winds in Israel. If our ancestors had not succumbed to positive thinking and had steadfastly maintained their negativity and defeatism carefully crafted over generations, we would have all stayed in Europe, where there was little problem assimilation in the 'shtetl' and there was certainly no problem with desert winds at all. Think of all the problems that could have been avoided had we only maintained our simple belief in the power of negative thinking.

So remember, as we go about discussing the challenges of our day, from the decisions we need to make about the future of our synagogue, to the politicians we will vote for, to our support for Israel – whatever you do, please don't listen to rabbis! Don't study today's torah portion or the *Haftarah*, for if you do, there is no telling what you are liable to *try* to achieve . . . and we all know, don't we, that achievement is never achievable as long as you maintain your belief in its fundamental impossibility.

Knaidel -- K-N-A-I-D-E-L -- Kanidel