

The Good Must Be Stronger than the Bad

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In 2001, the psychologists Ray Baumeister and Ellen Bratslavsky published an article called “Bad Is Stronger than Good.” Over 34 pages, they presented one example after another, a “disappointingly relentless pattern” of how we tend to dwell on negative things much more than on the positive:

- A survey of psychology textbooks in 1966¹ documented 121 chapters devoted to unpleasant emotions and only 52 devoted to pleasant ones.
- Another study² showed how the distress over losing money, say \$50, was much greater than the joy that accompanied gaining the same amount of money.
- A 1996³ study demonstrated that the effects of a bad day carried over far more noticeably to the next day than the effects of a particularly good day.
- The relationship expert John Gottman⁴ hypothesized that in successful relationships, positive and good interactions must outnumber negative and bad ones by at least 5 to 1.

Such is the power of the bad over the good.

¹ E.A. Carlson, (1966).

² Kahneman and Tversky (1984).

³ Sheldon, Ryan, and Reese (1996).

⁴ Gottman (1994).

Today's reading of Parashat Breishit set up a similar dynamic. God takes charge of creation and He is very proud of His work. We read at the end of the first chapter, "God saw all that He had made, **וירא אלהים את כל אשר עשה והנה טוב מאוד**, and behold it was very good." But then events happen: Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit, Cain kills Abel, divine beings consort with the daughters of man, and God is about ready to give up on the whole thing. Three verses from the end of the portion: "**וינחם ה' כי עשה את האדם בארץ**, The Lord regretted that He had made man on earth, and his heart was saddened."

What a downward spiral! It is a set up for next week when God will destroy the world in the Flood. God will promise never to do that again, but we have this recurring theme of the bad overcoming the good: God destroys the Tower of Babel and then the wicked cities of Sodom and Gemorrah. The Rabbis of the Midrash expand on the theme, as they imagine that God created multiple worlds and destroyed them before settling on this one. The Lord regretted all that he had made even though it was very good.

But the Torah also presents God fighting this tendency. Skipping ahead to Exodus, when the Israelites build the Golden Calf, God wants to destroy them as well. But Moses intervenes. His message? This people has the ability to do great things. Do not succumb to the human tendency to allow the bad to win out over the good. God relents because Moses essentially teaches God a lesson that we all would do well to learn.

Take technology and the rabbinate as an example. The news is all over the place about the terrible misuse of trust and authority perpetrated by a prominent rabbi in our community. It would be tempting to use this painful example of inappropriate activity as grounds to besmirch the holy work of not just rabbis, but all members of the cloth. And of technology more generally. Lives are less private than ever, and we know of individuals who have been denied jobs because potential employers found

pictures through Google of them doing stupid things that kids sometimes do. And even when we don't publish things on the internet, technology invites cyber-hackers and cyber-bullies and cyber-predators. It is scary and we have to be really careful.

But I don't think we want to walk away from religion. We don't want to give up on technology or make the internet go away. There is too much good that we would also be missing. Our teacher Avi West once joked that Google has become such an indispensable tool that the more religious are convinced it should be spelled G-ogle. We cannot allow the bad things to win out over the good.

After Shabbat, if you have time, do a Google search on "How to Deal with Criticism." You will see that there is a cottage industry because critics can be so hurtful; and with the internet, some will say things that they would never dream of saying to your face. My teacher at the Seminary, Rabbi Bill Lebeau, had his own advice for dealing with criticism, which he called the 2% rule. It wasn't scientific, but he said that every congregation is going to have 2% of the membership who are just completely out of line – it doesn't matter what you say or do, he reasoned, but these 2% are going to be unhappy. The problem is that many people allow the criticisms and comments of the 2% to bother them so much that they overshadow anything that the other 98% might say.

Of course there is a corollary, which is that it is only 2%. If you are hearing criticism from a member of the 98%, it would be wise to take the message to heart. We shouldn't ignore criticism because we can always be better. But we also shouldn't allow it to bring us down. We have to train ourselves to overcome the tendency that the bad is so much stronger than the good. Try to apply a little context to the negative things that we hear.

In 1907, Professor Israel Friedlander of the Jewish Theological Seminary delivered a speech entitled “The Problem of Judaism in America”, which had an unforgettable line: “The dawn of the Jew is the dusk of Judaism.” His point was that the greatest achievement of the modern world is also our greatest challenge. If Jews are free to practice Judaism as they choose, Jews must also be free to choose not to practice at all. In the modern world, religion is not automatic. We have to commit to being Jews by Choice; and some do and some don’t.

There are some who want to take it all back – build up our walls; ban television and the internet and university; shut out individuals who marry outside the faith; pretend the modern world doesn’t exist. But we can’t do that. Sure there are challenges, but there are so many good things that modernity has brought us. Jews are more successful, more free, more safe than at any time in our history. With all the negative statistics, we are still, in many ways, living in a golden age. We just have to work a little harder to let the good win out over the bad.

It is interesting that even as the narrative progresses from God’s satisfaction to God’s disgust with the world, there are hints that the solution to all our troubles lies with the very same human beings who are their cause. God punishes Adam for eating the forbidden fruit: “Cursed be the ground because of you, בעצבון תאכלנה, by toil shall you eat of it.” Life in the real world is going to be difficult. But that word “עצבון, toil” appears again. Ten generations after Adam, we meet Noah. Why is he named Noah? Because his father proclaimed, “This one will provide us relief from our work and from the toil of our hands, ומעצבון ידינו.” Humanity is the cause of toil/עצבון, but it is also the solution. Some view the expulsion from the garden as the downfall of humanity, but our tradition understands it as the beginning of history. How many wonderful things would not have been possible had Adam and Eve not left the garden and settled and populated the world?

The portion ends with a divine vote of confidence: “God’s heart was saddened, ויִתְעַצֵּב אֱלֹהִים” – it’s not an accident that the word for saddened is that same root from *itzavon/toil* – “וְנָח מִצָּא חֵן בְּעֵינֵי ה’” – “But Noah found favor with the Lord.” God is discouraged by the troubles of the world, but He maintains His faith in Noah. Even God takes time to learn the lesson fully, but the portion ends with a hint at the essential message of Torah: Do not let the bad have so much power over the good. Real life is never easy, real people are never perfect, progress is not without its drawbacks ... but God has faith in us and we must have faith in each other, faith in our essential ability to bring goodness and blessing to the world. Shabbat Shalom.

It is now my privilege to call on our bat mitzvah for this Shabbat, Ava Solomon.

Ava, I am excited to be the first to offer you words of *mazal tov* at such a special moment in your life. You were already seven years old when you moved to Rockville and to B’nai Israel, but the connections are so strong. Your grandfather Marty has been a member of this congregation for more than 20 years; your uncle Mitchell was a member of my first Confirmation class; for the past number of years I have worked closely with your mother on our annual Mitzvah Day; and the list goes on and on, but of course today is YOUR day.

Shabbat Breishit is a special portion. I think you know that yours is the same Torah portion that Rabbi Schnitzer chanted at his bar mitzvah; and actually, my wife Sharon also shares a bat mitzvah connection to Parashat Breishit.

Shabbat Breishit also marks the end of the fall holiday cycle. Yesterday we celebrated Simchat Torah – we read the last words of the book of Devarim, and then immediately we rolled the Torah back

to the beginning and began reading Breishit. That's how time works in Judaism; it is cyclical. Nothing is ever really finished; when we conclude the cycle, we start again, determined to be even better the next time around.

And that is how bat mitzvah works as well. You worked very hard to make it to this moment, and you chanted beautifully and delivered a great d'var torah. But now that you are finished, it's back to B'reishit. Today is a day of new beginnings as you get some letters attached to your name. You are now "Ava Solomon, BM" (or במ) for bat mitzvah. Today you accept new responsibilities as you are called upon to make Torah and *mitzvot* a part of your life. We have heard about your *hesed* project with Magen David Adom and the Bethesda Rescue squad, and we look forward to other *mitzvah* projects: continuing your Jewish education, strengthening your connection to the State of Israel, celebrating Shabbat and holidays, and continuing to serve the community and repair the world. Think of it as a checklist: You are בראשית, at the beginning of this new journey, and your task as you move forward will be to find *mitzvah* opportunities and check them off your list.

Don't worry; you won't be alone, as the members of this congregation are eager to join you along the way. And we have great confidence in your abilities to make a difference for your family, the community, and ultimately the entire world. As a sign of our confidence in you, I want to ask the congregation to please rise for the Priestly Blessing.