

5780/ 2019-Rosh HaShanah Day 2 Sermon  
**Hagar, Joshua & Caleb, Joseph & Judah:**  
**The Positive Side of Negative Character Traits**  
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**Hopelessness.** It is a mindset that some of us have experienced when we felt that something was slipping through our fingers & was never coming back. It is the feeling that we might have had after being fired or ‘downsized’ out of a job. It’s the feeling that we might have had after searching for a new job for many months or even years, to no avail. It is the feeling that we might have had in the aftermath of a medical diagnosis or after experiencing the death of a loved one.

**Hopelessness.** That is the emotion expressed by Avraham & Sara’s handmaid, **Hagar**, in the Rosh HaShanah Torah reading from **Parashat VaYera** that we read yesterday. When Hagar was in the wilderness with her baby, Yishmael, and she ran out of water, she became convinced that her son was doomed to die. Hagar then cast Yishmael under a bramble bush and sat down at a distance, a bowshot away, saying to herself, **“Ahl ereh b’mote ha-yeled.”**

“Let me not look on as the young boy dies.”

And then, the Torah tells us, **“Va-tisa et kolah va-tevk.”** In the Etz Hayim Humash, this expression is translated idiomatically as “She burst into tears.” But a more literal translation is, **“She lifted up her voice and cried.” (Genesis 21: 16)**

This particular Hebrew expression is used throughout the Torah to convey a sense of **utter hopelessness and despair.**

It is the same language used to describe **Esav**, after he discovered that his brother, *Yaakov*, tricked their father (*Yitzchak*) into giving *Yaakov* the blessing that was supposed to have been bestowed upon Esav. In **Parashat Toldot (in Genesis 27:38)**, the Torah tells us that *Esav* said to his father, "Have you but one blessing, my father?! Bless me too, Dad." And then, this is how the Torah describes *Esav's* behavior & mindset: "***Va-yisa Esav kolo va-yevk.***" :**Esau lifted up his voice and cried.**"

For example, the very same **language of hopelessness** is used in **Parashat Shelach Lecha**, in which we read the **story of the spies**. God told Moshe to choose one man from each of the 12 tribes and to send them on a mission to scout out the Promised Land of Canaan. So, 12 spies were sent to see what the land was like, and to get a sense of the people who lived there.

So the spies headed out, stopping at the town of Hebron among other places. They covered a lot of ground on their scouting mission. And then, they returned to Moshe & the Israelites with their report: Ten of the 12 scouts delivered an extremely negative report. They said, "The people who live there are strong and scary.....And the land? (It's a) land that **devours** its inhabitants. Trying to conquer that land would be a suicide mission."

These 10 spies described the inhabitants of the land as giants, with the Israelites looking and feeling like grasshoppers in comparison. Convinced that they didn't have the physical power to prevail over the land's inhabitants, the Israelites felt utterly **hopeless**. And they expressed this sense of **hopelessness** by breaking into loud cries. As the Torah says, (**Numbers 14:1**),

ותשא כל העדה ויתנו את קולם ויבכו העם בלילה ההוא

*"Va-tisa kol ha-edah, va-yitnu et kolam va-yivku ha-ahm ba-lailah ha-hu"*

"All of the people in the entire community lifted up their voices & cried that night."

But one of the spies, **Calev (Caleb)**, stood up, and said to the people, “Don’t listen to the 10 naysayers! We can conquer the land!”

Unfortunately, it was too late. The people were already in mourning. So *Calev* stood up again, this time with another one of the spies, **Yehoshua (Joshua)**, at his side, and together, they tried to turn the tide, insisting, טוֹבָה הָאָרֶץ מְאֹד מְאֹד – that it’s a very very good land, that God will protect them.

But the people wouldn’t hear it. They felt an utter sense of despair and **hopelessness** in the wake of the disheartening news presented by 10 of the spies. In fact, the Israelites were just about to kill Caleb and Joshua when God jumped in and said: “That’s enough! You don’t want My land? Fine! You don’t get My land. No one is going anywhere for 40 years. You’re all going to die here, wandering in this wilderness.”

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In the Torah, there is another story that is very similar to the one told in *Parashat Shelach Lecha* in a couple of ways. That other story also has the following elements:

- 1-It refers to **12 people** ,
- 2-Someone is **sent** on a mission
- 3-to **see** something,
- 4-to **bring back a report**,
- 5-The town of **Hebron** is mentioned
- 6-Something gets **devoured**, &
- 7-**Crying** is involved.

There is only **other story in the Torah** where we find, not one, not two, but **all 7 of these elements!**

It's the story of *Yoseph* (Joseph) and his jealous, vengeful older brothers in ***Parashat VaYeshev, Genesis Chapter 37***. There, we meet 12 people (#1), namely, the 12 sons of *Yaakov* (Jacob). And one day, they were out shepherding their flocks, and *Yaakov* (Jacob) called *Yoseph* over, and said to him:

אֶשְׁלַחְךָ אֵלֵיהֶם – “I’m **sending** you on a mission” (#2),

וְרָאָה אֶת-שְׁלוֹם אַחֶיךָ – “**See** how your brothers are doing” (#3)

וְהִשְׁבֵּנִי דְבָר – “And **report** back to me” (#4)

וַיִּשְׁלַחְהוּ מֵעֵמֶק הַחֲבֵרוֹן – and he sent him from the valley of **Hebron** (#5)

So *Yoseph* met up with his brothers. But as we all know, the story took a crazy turn: When the older brothers saw Joseph coming, they decided to kill him.

וְאָמְרָנוּ תִּיהֵא רְעָה אֲכָלְתָהוּ – “We’ll say that a wild animal **devoured** him” – — something is devoured (#6)

That, of course, was a lie. The wild animal didn’t really devour Joseph, just like the land of Israel doesn’t really devour its inhabitants. The brothers took Joseph, cast him into a pit and then *Yehudah* (Judah) spoke up and voiced a different idea:

— מה-בְּצַע כִּי נִהְרַג אֶת-אֶחָינוּ?

“What do we gain by killing him? Let’s sell him for a profit.”

Given *Yehudah*’s charismatic leadership style and the high status he enjoyed among his siblings, the brothers followed *Yehudah*’s lead & sold *Yoseph* as a slave. He ended up in Egypt, and the rest is history. And then, when the brothers brought a bloodied coat to their father, *Yaakov* believed that Joseph was dead and he cried. וַיִּבֶן אֹתוֹ. — — — — —There’s your crying (#7).

So, there you have it: All 7 of the elements that appeared in the spies story also appeared in the story of *Yoseph*’s brothers. But that’s not all!

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Here's another parallel:

What was the **consequence of each of these sins** –the sin of the spies and the sin of the sale of Yoseph?

•For the **sin of the spies**, God decreed the punishment that Bnai Yisrael would have to spend 40 years wandering outside the land (1 year for each day of the scouting mission).

•And what were the consequences of the **sale of Yoseph**? Yoseph went down to Egypt, a famine seized the land, the brothers traveled to Egypt, they reunited with Joseph, they relocated to Goshen... and they ended up having to endure hundreds of years of slavery before they could finally head back to the Promised Land.

What we have here are two sins: and they both ended with a **delayed entrance to the Promised Land**.

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And there's one more parallel: I mentioned earlier that the spies said some nasty things about the land. The Hebrew word that the Torah uses to describe those nasty things is "**dibah**." וַיְצִיאוּ דִבַּת הָאָרֶץ.

**Dibah** means **evil talk**, an evil report.

Now, *dibah* is a very unusual word – it only comes up one other time in the entire Torah. Can you guess where? Yes, you got it: also in the *Yoseph* story:

– וַיְבֵא יוֹסֵף אֶת-דִּבְתֵּיָם רָעָה אֶל-אֲבִיהֶם

“Joseph brought **dibah** – an **evil report** – about his brothers to his father.”

He tattle-taled on them.

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It's just one parallel after the next. The classical commentators – **Nachmanides (Ramban)** and others – also pick up on these connections. It's like the Torah is trying to tell us: “If you want to understand the story of the spies in **the Book of Numbers (Ba-Midbar), Chapter 13** then you have to read it, side by side, with this other story, the story of the sale of *Yoseph* in **the Book of Genesis (B'raisheet) Chapter 37**. These two stories illuminate one another.”

So we see the parallels, but **how do these stories illuminate one another?** I think that the key to answering that question lies in that final parallel – in the word, “***dibah.***” (“**evil talk**”)

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What prompted the sale of *Yoseph*? Yes, his brothers did this horrendous thing to him, but... did their anger and jealousy come out of nowhere?! No! *Yoseph* contributed to the sibling rivalry. He had dreams of grandeur & then chose to share those dreams with his brothers. He accepted a special coat (the “*k’tonet passim*”) as a gift from his father. And he publicly displayed that visual sign of his “favored child” status by prancing around in that *k’tonet* in front of his brothers./ And before all that, this chapter in the Torah opened with a description of the tension that existed between these brothers as a result of ***Yoseph’s dibah*** (evil talk, tattling)

And that, I think, is **one way in which the story of the spies is illuminating the story of *Yoseph***. It is reminding us that *Yoseph* wasn’t just a victim. I’m not saying that *Yoseph* was the big villain in the story, but he wasn’t blameless either.

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And how does the story of *Yoseph* in **Genesis 37** change the way we read the story of the spies in **Numbers 13**? The answer to this question is rooted in the tribal backgrounds of the **two heroes of the spies story, *Calev* & *Yehoshua* (Caleb and Joshua):**

**CALEB** was from the tribe of **Judah**. : למטה יהודה כלב בן-יפנה :

And **JOSHUA** ? He was from the tribe of **Ephraim**. למטה אפרים הושע בן-נון

And that essentially means that Joshua was a descendant of **Joseph (who was Ephraim's father)**.

**JUDAH** (an ancestor of CALEB) & **JOSEPH** (an ancestor of JOSHUA) were the 2 most prominent actors in **Genesis 37**, and then, hundreds of years later, **someone from the tribe of Judah and someone from the tribe of Joseph were together again – except this time, it was different. This time, they were not contributing to a disastrous situation; they were actually trying to rectify it, by directly **addressing their ancestors' mistakes**.**

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What was ***Yehudah's* big mistake in **Genesis 37****? He was the guy who spoke up and talked the others into selling Joseph into slavery. He was the gang-leader. He emerged as a **leader** among his brothers on that day, but **he used his leadership for evil**.

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And now look at ***Yehudah's* descendant, **CALEV**, who appeared in *Parashat Shelach Lecha***. He was the guy who spoke up and tried to persuade the others. In some ways, he was just **like his ancestor, *Yehudah***: he displayed that same courage, those same leadership qualities... except **unlike *Yehudah***, he did not **use his leadership for evil purposes**. Caleb used that leadership quality for a good purpose (or at least he tried to!). And by doing so, he effectively **redeemed *Yehudah's* mistake**.

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And what about **Yoseph**? What was his big mistake? Well, it all started with the **dibah**, the evil talk that poisoned his relationship with his brothers.

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And now compare **Yoseph** to his descendant, **YEHOSHUA**. In the story of the spies, some people spoke *dibah*, and perhaps that set off warning bells for him. Joshua seems to remember his ancestor's mistake, knowing all too well where *dibah* could lead. So, whereas Joseph was the speaker of *dibah*, his descendant Joshua took a stand against *dibah*. insisting,

טוֹבָה הָאָרֶץ מְאֹד מְאֹד – “It’s a very, very good land!”

And in doing so, he **redeemed his ancestor, Joseph’s, age-old error.**

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And the beautiful thing is that **Joshua & Caleb did this together**. Caleb put himself out there and Joshua stepped up and stood with him, as if to say, “My brother, there was a time when we were on opposing sides of the story. But today, I’ve got your back.”

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Now, the Israelite people didn’t listen to Caleb and Joshua, but does that mean that their heroic stand didn’t mean anything? No! *Caleb* and *Yehoshua* still succeeded in accomplishing something on that day. That’s how Genesis 37 sheds light on the story of the spies. It shows us that the story of the spies isn’t just about 10 people who do wrong and 2 who try to do right, to no avail. *Parashat Shelach Lecha*, in **Numbers 13**, tells a story about redeeming the mistakes of our past. Caleb and Joshua demonstrated what it looks like to remember the past, but to choose a different ending.

And the way they did that was by **channeling the very same middot, the very same character traits, that got their ancestors into trouble in the first place:**

•**Judah & his descendant, Caleb**, both exhibited **leadership skills**.

•**Joseph & his descendant, Joshua**, both did something connected **dibah**.

But they both succeeded in **transforming their inherited negative traits into something positive**. The **Rabbis of the Mussar Movement** taught: We we don't really have bad character traits; rather, there's only the palette of character traits that God gives us, and **each trait can be channeled for bad or for good**.

This teaching reminds me of a Jewish parenting workshop that I attended many years ago, led by the psychologist, **Dr. Wendy Mogel**, author of the bestselling parenting book (2001), "**The Blessing of a Skinned Knee: Using Jewish Teachings to Raise Self-Reliant Children**". Wendy began her session by saying, "Think of your child's worst trait: the little habit or attitude that really gets on your nerves. Or the medium-sized (bad) habit that the teacher keeps bringing up at parent-teacher conferences. Or the really big bad habit that wakes you up at 3 in the morning with frightening version of your little guy all grown up 'and living alone in a seedy apartment, planning a bank robbery.] Nod your head when you've come up with it (your child's worst trait, his biggest weakness)." Of course, within 10 seconds, the head of every parent in the room was bobbing. Then Dr. Mogel continued, "Good, Now, you're one step ahead of where you were a moment ago, because now you know **your child's greatest STRENGTH (as well). It's hidden in his WORST quality, just waiting to be let out.**"

Dr. Mogel was essentially speaking about the Jewish concept known as **Yetzer Ha-Ra, the Evil Inclination**. That same evil impulse is also the source of all passion and creativity. *Yetzer HaRa* is a warehouse for a person's curiosity, ambition, and potency.

In the **Midrash, B'raisheet Rabbah, Genesis 9:7**, there is a commentary on the biblical verse, "**V'hineh tov m'od**" (**Genesis 1:31**):

Rabbi Nachman said in Rabbi Shmuel's name:

"*Hineh tov m'od*" ("Behold it was very good")- refers to the Good Impulse (*Yetzer Ha-Tov*.)

"**V***hineh tov m'od*" ("**And** behold it was very good")- refers to to the Evil Impulse (*Yetzer Ha-Ra*)

Can then the Evil Impulse (*Yetzer Ha-Ra*) be "very good"?!

That would be extraordinary!

But if not for *Yetzer HaRa*, however, no man would build a house, take a wife, and beget children;

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The story of the spies, when read in light of the story of *Yoseph* & his brothers, should not only lead us to consider our children's negative traits and evil impulses, but to also consider our own weaknesses, our own *Yetzer Ha-Ra*. Every one of us has a part of ourselves that we struggle with. Of course, I wish that I could wake up tomorrow, thrilled to find that all of my flaws have just magically disappeared overnight. But that is an overly simplistic way of looking at things.

Consider for a moment one of your **NEGATIVE traits**. We all have them, which is why we can relate all too well to the *Video* confession on Yom Kippur, *Ashamnu, Bagadnu*. And now think about the possible **POSITIVE aspects of that very same characteristic**.

Let's say that you have an anger-management **PROBLEM**, an explosive **temper**. Do you lash out at your loved ones when you get frustrated? Clearly, that's a shortcoming, a manifestation of your *Yetzer Ha-Ra*. Some of us really have to work on that negative trait. But, even as we acknowledge our weaknesses, I think that it is also important to dig a little deeper into that trait.

If you sometimes lose your temper or express your frustration in hurtful ways, that may also mean that you are a **passionate** person. When that passion is expressed in a negative way, we call that "**anger**" and view it **NEGATIVELY**.

But **that same passion that causes you to lose your temper, can also compel you to act, to intervene, in POSITIVE ways**, to stand up in the face of injustice, or to get involved when you see a vulnerable person who needs help. The same kind of impatience that may cause you to lose your cool on occasion may also be indicative of your tendency to have a **healthy dissatisfaction with the status quo** & enable you to **motivate others to change**, especially those who are inherently more complacent and satisfied with lower standards.

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Or, let's say that you have **OCD tendencies**. Perhaps you are always late because you are compulsive about finishing a project that you are working on & have a hard time tearing yourself away from that project to move on to your next activity. There are clear **DOWNSIDES** to these tendencies.

But there are **POSITIVE** aspects as well. People who are compulsive also tend to be very detail-oriented and can be counted on to be excellent proofreaders, among other things.

Or perhaps, on the flip side, you are someone who tends to **forget birthdays & anniversaries, or who doesn't remember to buy every item on the shopping list**. That is the kind of **NEGATIVE** trait that will drive your spouse, parents, and friends crazy.

But this trait may also have a **POSITIVE** aspect to it. The kind of person who isn't bogged down with the details of remembering special occasions or every single item on the list may be someone who is laid back and "**doesn't sweat the small stuff**". He may be someone who can get others to see the big picture.

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In addition to helping us identify the **PROs** & **CONs** of individual traits, this analysis can also be applied at the communal level.

As many of you know, the extended Wyner family from NJ, NY, MA, PA, & Canada get together in Ocean City one weekend every summer. What you may not know is that we bring a Torah scroll with us, from which we read *Parashat Ha-Shavua*, the weekly Torah portion. When my mother-in-law, Nusha Wyner z"l, was alive, she used to give the *Dvar Torah* after Shabbat morning services & this tradition has now been passed down to her children and grandchildren.

This past August (2019), the reading was *Parashat Ekev* & it was our daughter, *Rivkah*, who prepared the *Dvar Torah*. As she pointed out to us, in **Deuteronomy 9:6**, Moshe refers to the Israelites as “עם קשה ערף” (“*ahm k’sheh oref*”) (“a stiff-necked people”)<sup>1</sup>. In general, this is perceived as a **NEGATIVE trait**. So, for example, the commentator **Sforno** teaches that being “stiff-necked” means that the people were stubborn, inflexible, & incapable of change.

And the commentator, **Abravanel**, teaches that a “stiff-necked” person is someone who cannot look behind him and see how his actions have led him to where he finds himself<sup>2</sup>.

In fact, we even list the attribute of “being stiff necked” among the transgressions in the *Vidui* (“**Ashamnu... Kishinu oref** ערף קשינו”).

However, there is a **POSITIVE aspect to this trait as well**. According to the **Midrash B’raishet Rabbah 42:9**, the stubbornness of the Jews in the face of persecution is a characteristic that has enabled the Jewish people to survive and thrive throughout the generations. Being steadfast to **Jewish traditions** is what has enabled the Jews to maintain their identity as a people.

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<sup>1</sup> Context of *Parashat Ekev*: It’s not because of Bnai Yisrael’s virtuousness that God has bestowed gifts upon them; it’s God’s grace. God bestows blessings on Bnai Yisrael despite (bad) behavior, not because of (good) behavior. Despite the people being “stiff-necked”, God bestowed blessings on them even though they didn’t deserve it.

<sup>2</sup> Etz Hayim Humash commentary on Deuteronomy 9:6, p. 1043

One of the most cherished **Jewish traditions** is the observance of Rosh HaShanah & Yom Kippur. That's probably why there are more people in shul on the **High Holidays** than on any other days during the year.

During this **High Holidays season**, inasmuch as we focus on identifying our FLAWS and making amends for our BAD behavior, we must keep in mind that **God doesn't want us to completely deny or extinguish those essential parts of ourselves that may be considered NEGATIVE.**

As the rabbi, **Ben Zoma**, teaches in **Pirkei Avot 4:1-**  
**“Eyzehu gibor? Ha-kovesh et yitzro.” איזהו גבור? הכובש את יצרו**  
**“Who is strong? One who conquers (or subdues) his evil inclination.”**

The *Kadosh Baruch Hu* doesn't expect or even want us to eliminate our *Yetzer Ha-Ra*; God just wants us to find POSITIVE outlets for the expression of our seemingly **NEGATIVE** tendencies, to channel our so-called 'EVIL' inclinations in CONSTRUCTIVE ways.

In a sense, God just wants us to do what **Caleb and Joshua** did in the story of the spies in the **Book of Numbers, Parashat Shelach Lecha**. Just as these two biblical heroes took the attributes that their ancestors may have expressed in **NEGATIVE** ways in the past & they found ways to channel them in POSITIVE ways, so too may we try find ways to express our 'EVIL INCLINATIONS' in POSITIVE ways.

During this season of *teshuvah*, as we all strive towards self-improvement, may we all reflect upon our own character traits that may have manifested themselves in **NEGATIVE** ways in the past & take the necessary steps to make these traits SHINE in the future.

And, in the process of developing **PRODUCTIVE, POSITIVE** ways to express & channel our **SHORTCOMINGS**, let's not give in to the unproductive mindset of **hopelessness**. *Ken y'hi ratzon. L'Shanah Tovkah u-Metukah.*

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