

Curtis Clubs, Avatars, and the Power of Positive Thinking

“What’s the new psychological trick for improving performance? Strategic lying.” Thus began a recent article in the New York Times about enhancing the skill of amateur athletes. Strangely enough it seems that when recreational golfers were told that the club they were using belonged to PGA pro Ben Curtis, they putted better than other players using the exact same piece of equipment. Similarly, when human cyclists were pitted against a computer-generated avatar supposedly moving at the best speed that each individual had previously attained (but actually moving two percent faster!), the human cyclists were able to keep pace with their on-screen counterparts – thus surpassing their own prior records! “Lying is obviously not a long-term strategy,” the article concludes – although its reason for condemning falsehood is made on psychological, rather than on moral, grounds. “Once you realize what’s going on, the effects may evaporate. It works [only] as long as your trainer can keep the secret” (Gretchen Reynolds, “PLAY; The Liar’s Workout,” New York Times June 3, 2012).

Some of you will know that I am no great athlete, and I certainly would never wish to endorse lying, but still this article captured my curiosity. While motivational sayings such as “You are what you believe” or “If you think you can, you will” are beautiful and inspiring (who among us does not love the childhood story The Little Engine That Could?), still many will be surprised to learn that there is real science backing up these claims – that what we think really can and does affect what we are able to achieve. And this is true not only in the realm of sports! At the University of Pennsylvania, my former professor Dr. Martin Seligman has created the Positive Psychology Center which posits that training people to think more optimistically can lead to greater success in school and work. Dr. Shelley Taylor and her colleagues at UCLA have demonstrated that positive thinking can prevent both physical and mental illness. Even the United States military has started to incorporate positive psychology and resilience training into their comprehensive soldier fitness program, emphasizing the connection between sound mind and sound

body. As interesting and innovative as all this research is, it should not come as much of a surprise to us – frequent readers of *Tanach* (Bible). Rather, it is laid out plainly in our Torah portion this morning, *Parashat Sh'lach L'cha*.

In this week's Torah portion Moses sends twelve spies into Canaan to scout out the land and report back to the rest of the Israelites. The ten "bad" spies – as they are so often called – return with mixed reviews, indicating that the land itself is beautiful and fertile but that it is inhabited by large and formidable people who will surely overpower them. As a result, they do not wish to continue further with the plan of conquest and begin to foment anxiety and fear within the community. The two remaining spies, Joshua and Caleb, affirm their faith that God will deliver them. Despite the seemingly overwhelming odds, they advocate for proceeding ahead as planned – certain of God's power and beneficence.

Of course, we all know how the story turns out - while the generation of the spies ultimately perish in the wilderness, their descendents go on to enter the land of Israel where God does, indeed, grant them victory over all manner of menacing enemy. But suppose that we were not privy to such information – do the spies' concerns really seem so unwarranted? After all, they are asked by Moses to strategically evaluate the inhabitants of Canaan, as he charges them: "Are the people who dwell in the land strong or weak, few or many? Are the towns they live in open or fortified?" The very fact that Moses sends the spies on a scouting mission in the first place might reasonably lead us to believe that conquest is still an open question – that Moses is attempting to gather information as to whether or not entering the land of Israel is a good and viable option. These ten spies are often referred to as "bad." Yet it seems like all that they did was to enter a truthful report of that which they had seen.

Indeed, the great medieval commentator Ramban raises this very issue, indicating that Moses

essentially set the spies up for failure when he asked them questions to which he was not going to like the answer. He writes, “What did the spies do [wrong]? ...They had to give [Moses] an answer to [the questions] that he asked them. Did he then send them [to Canaan] on the understanding that they would give him a false report?!?” We might wish that all twelve of the spies had had the incredible faith of Joshua and Caleb - believing that God would save them, no matter the odds. Still, we cannot quite blame the scouts for accurately describing what their eyes had seen.

The dilemma that Ramban raises becomes all the more pronounced when we look at the immediate aftermath of the spies’ return. As Joshua and Caleb try unsuccessfully to convince the people that their concerns are unfounded, God becomes more and more agitated. Note that Joshua and Caleb do not necessarily dispute the *content* of the other spies’ report; they never say that the inhabitants of the land are weak and poorly organized or that the cities appear ill-fortified and easy to penetrate. Rather, they maintain that God will continue to protect the people no matter what, while the rest of the community longs for Egypt and threatens to pelt them with stones. Finally, God has had enough and tells Moses to inform the people that they will all die in the wilderness, that none of them – save for Joshua and Caleb – will be privileged to enter the Promised Land. “You shall bear your punishment for forty years – corresponding to the number of days – forty days – that you scouted the land,” says God. “Thus, you shall know what it means to thwart Me (Numbers 14:34).”

Traditional commentary on *Parashat Sh’lach L’cha* has largely focused on this punishment, and God’s anger, as a way of explaining the sin of the spies - their error, according to many sages, was not one of *information* but rather one of *interpretation*. Even knowing that the land was dangerous, the spies should have had faith in God – the same God who had delivered them safely from Egypt, the same God who had protected them against Amalek and other enemies. God, in fact, has had a pretty good track

record at this point when it comes to keeping the Israelites free from harm. The people should have recognized this and had faith in God's might.

There is another possibility, however, for where the spies went wrong and why their generation was ultimately barred from entering the land of Israel. It is true, of course, that the Israelites displayed a shocking lack of faith in God during this episode, but they also displayed a shocking lack of faith in themselves – not telling the “strategic lies” that might have enhanced their performance, not believing that they were capable of great things. In fact, the spies returned to Moses not only reporting on the size and ferocity of the inhabitants of Canaan but already convinced that the Canaanites would surely defeat them in battle saying, “All the people we saw...are men of great size...we looked like grasshoppers to ourselves, and so we must have looked to them (Numbers 13:33).” Midrash Tanhuma emphasizes how very discouraging and pessimistic a statement this is when it imagines God's words to the spies immediately after this proclamation is made. Said God, “You don't know what you have let your mouths utter. I am ready to put up with your saying, ‘We were in our own eyes as grasshoppers.’ But I do take offense at your asserting, ‘And so we were in their eyes.’ Could you possibly know how I made you appear in their eyes? How do you know that in their eyes you were not as angels?!”

It is bad enough that the spies did not have confidence in God, but they also did not have confidence in themselves; they had psyched themselves out and prepared for failure rather than for success. Rather than imaging that the Canaanites viewed them as angels or fierce warriors or at the very least equal competitors ready to give fair fight, the Israelites lost the battle before it had even begun. They had no way of knowing what the inhabitants of the land thought of them, yet they chose to assume the very worst. This, to be sure, was a reflection of their own self perception.

The people were not yet ready to attack and conquer the Promised Land, and I believe that it is for that reason that they were doomed to wander and ultimately die in the wilderness -- not necessarily as *punishment* but rather because they were incapable of carrying out this next phase of people-hood. Members of the post-Egypt generation were not warriors; their muscles may have become strong from back-breaking work building pyramids, but their spirit and confidence had atrophied. In the words of the great sage Maimonides, "One cannot be expected to leave the state of slavery, toiling in bricks and straw, and go to fight with giants. It was therefore part of the Divine wisdom to make them wander through the wilderness until they had become schooled in courage, until a new generation grew up who had never known humiliation and bondage" (Humash Etz Hayim, p. 840).

All this, of course, brings us right back to where we began – to golf clubs and computer avatars and centers of positive psychology. There is both a scientific and a spiritual reality to the power of positive thinking – what we believe really does affect what we are able to achieve, be it conquering a band of Canaanites, besting one's high score on the exercise bike, coping with a global pandemic, or looking more generally to bring success, fulfillment, and happiness into our lives. I by no means wish to advocate for empty boosterism – in fact, much of the positive psychology literature talks about the need to evaluate oneself and one's circumstances both generously *and* honestly; it talks, too, about the dangers of being overly optimistic and about the psychological need to express sadness, disappointment, anger and grief each in its own season. Yet I still believe that one of the lessons of this discipline, and of this *parasha*, is that we can often change our experience of the world by changing the way that we think about it. The transformation from slaves to warriors lies within the power of our own confidence and imagination.

Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that God became so concerned when the Divine saw the people losing faith, feeling that their small size would necessarily doom them to certain defeat. We, the Jewish

people, the descendants of both those who died in the wilderness because of their lack of confidence and of their children who entered the land with courage and spirit, now serve as a reminder that numbers alone do not determine destiny. In many ways, our people are a living embodiment of the idea that “If you think you can, you will” – be it our resilience in the aftermath of Nazi Europe and persecutions of every imaginable kind, our creation of the modern State of Israel, our ability to live and succeed, survive and flourish after thousands of years, even when we are so small a percentage of the world population. Perhaps it is that we are rooted in texts like this one, stories that remind us to always have confidence and faith no matter the circumstances. Perhaps it is our traditions and culture which so often point to the importance of optimism, be it through eating greasy latkes made with oil that far exceeded expectations or through singing the national anthem of our homeland, aptly named “The Hope.” And perhaps it is our community, that as we so often gather together on mornings such as this we cannot help but feel a sense of confidence and pride, a joy in being connected and looking towards a strong future. Whatever it is, these are our community’s equivalent of using a faux Ben Curtis club. They are the ways we are constantly challenging ourselves to be and do our best and to always believe that we can achieve great things.

Strategic lying may well be the wave of the future, but to inspire positive thinking I still prefer the call of the past. “If you think you can, you will.” That, indeed, is the story of our people. Shabbat Shalom!