



From Past to Future • Parshat Ekev

Prospection is the ability to think about, imagine, and plan for the future. Depressed people tend to get stuck in past experiences and, as Martin Seligman and Anne Marie Roepke describe in the book *Homo Prospectus*, they also exhibit faulty thinking about the future. Cognitive behavioral therapy and positive psychology interventions target ruminative thinking about the past and amplify optimistic thinking about the future. This week's parsha highlights the positive and negative aspects of prospection.

The opening word of *Parshat Ekev*, for example, is not its namesake, *Ekev*, but *Vehaya* – “And it shall be (*Vehaya*), if (*ekev*) you listen to these laws and are careful to follow them, then the Lord your God will keep the covenant and love with which He made an oath to your fathers” (Deut. 7:12). One midrash explains that the word *vehaya* generally connotes happiness, while the word *vayehi* (and it was) denotes pain and sadness (*Bereishit Rabbah* 42:3).

Rabbi David Tebel, quoted by Rabbi Baruch Simon in his *Imrei Baruch*, provides an astute psychological insight to enlighten this cryptic midrash. The root of the word *vehaya* is *haya*, which means “it was.” The letter *vov* at the beginning of the word is known as a *vov ha-hifuch*, which transforms the word from past (“and it was”) to future tense (“it shall be”). In contrast, the root of *vayehi* is *yehi*, which is future tense (“it shall be”), but the opening *vov* changes the word to “and it was.” *Vehaya* reflects the ability to transform the past into the future, and *vayehi* reverts the future back to the past. Rabbi Tebel

suggests that happiness stems from the ability to be future-oriented, while remaining stuck in the past leads to misery.

There are two other references in *Parshat Ekev* to the word *vehaya*. Based on the aforementioned midrash, commentaries attempt to frame these verses through the prism of happiness as well. In a puzzling usage, the verse states “And it shall be (*vehaya*), if you ever forget (*im shakhoah tishkchah*) the Lord your God... I testify against you today that you will surely perish” (Deut. 8:19). A literal reading of the verse, a future in which the Israelites potentially forget God, hardly allows for an interpretation of “*vehaya*” as happiness.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk rereads the verse with quintessential Hasidic creativity. In Hebrew, the word for “forget” is written twice – “*shakhoah tishkchah*.” The Rebbe of Kotzk suggests that the verse can be split into two, leading to an innovative interpretation: “*Vehaya im shakhoah*” – “And if you forget ‘*vehaya*,’” meaning, if you forget to be happy, then you will inevitably “*tishkchah et Hashem*,” forget God. Joy is essential to the spiritual quest. It is difficult to serve God properly in a state of dejection.

Yet such happiness needs to be an appropriately religious happiness. The third verse that starts with the word *vehaya* is also the beginning of the second paragraph of the daily Shema recitation. “*Vehaya* – And it shall come to pass – *im shamoaah tishmeu* – if you surely listen to My commandments which I am commanding you today, to love the

Lord your God and to serve Him with all your heart and all your soul” (Deut. 11:13). Rabbi Chaim ibn Attar, in his commentary *Ohr HaChaim*, writes that the midrashic happiness embedded in *vehaya* is contingent on the happiness being an outgrowth of “if you surely listen to My commandments.” If the happiness lacks a spiritual luster, it does not qualify as a worthy “*vehaya*.”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks advocates a positive future-oriented perspective in much of his writing and teaching as a source of well-being: “I believe

that the way we write the next chapter in our lives affects all the others that have come before. By action in the future, we can redeem much of the pain of the past” (“The Future of the Past,” *Covenant & Conversation*). Judaism as a whole is “written in future tense” (*Future Tense*). By transforming the past into the future through the process of *vehaya*, we are able to tap into this essential aspect of Jewish faith, enabling us to lead lives imbued with emotional flourishing and spiritual happiness.

Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman is an assistant professor at the Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration, associate faculty at the Sacks-Herenstein Center, the associate rabbi at Kingsway Jewish Center, and the author of Psyched for Torah: Cultivating Character and Well-Being through the Weekly Parsha.

Character Challenge: Be mindful when you ruminate about the past. What can you do to move forward and think more positively about your future?

Quote from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt”l: “The future is the sphere of human freedom, because I cannot change yesterday but I can change tomorrow by what I do today. Therefore, because Judaism is a religion of the future it is a religion of human freedom, and because Israel is a future-oriented nation, it remains, in the Middle East, an oasis of freedom in a desert of oppression. Tragically, most of Israel’s enemies are fixated on the past, and as long as they remain so, their people will never find freedom and Israel will never find peace... I believe that we must honour the past but not live in it...” (“Faith in the Future,” *Covenant & Conversation*).