

Parashat Ki Tavo
"Oy vey, Maria"

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Some of you may have heard last week about a recent study from the Mayo Clinic Department of Psychiatry and Psychology. The study was about the influence of attitude on health. The principal author of the study reported that "The wellness of being is not just physical, but attitudinal," [Dr. Toshihiko Maruta, M.D., of the Mayo Clinic Department of Psychiatry and Psychology in Rochester and the principal author of the study, which appears in the August issue of Mayo Clinic Proceedings].

The researchers reported that "People who are overly pessimistic tend to have worse health long-term than their more positive peers." I say you might have heard about this study because several media sources picked up on it, but my favorite report on it was not Reuters, but Satirewire[.com] who began their news story with this sentence: "A study issued Tuesday claiming that pessimists have more long-term health problems than positive people just proves pessimists were right, say pessimists."

The story continues: "The research, conducted by the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., found that less positive people suffer significantly higher rates of illness, and advised physicians to encourage their patients to adopt a more positive outlook to improve and lengthen their lives. Pessimists across the country said they would try, though they seriously doubted it would work. 'OK, here's a positive thought,' said Chicago resident Eric Weinstadt. 'Why not save me the trouble I'm going to have later and just shoot me now?'" The article went on a bit longer, but you get the idea.

By the way, did you notice the name of the presumably made-up Chicago resident quoted in the story? Eric Weinstadt - sounds Jewish, doesn't it? And I'm thinking that may not be a coincidence. In fact, maybe he isn't a made-up character. Judaism and pessimism sometimes seem to go together like lox and bagels.

I recently met a Catholic man who told me a story about when his daughter was young, and they lived in an apartment building where his was the only

non-Jewish family. His daughter played with all the Jewish kids in the building, but she went to school at a nearby Catholic private school. One day her dad asked what she had learned in school that day. "A new song!" she exclaimed, "Oy Vey, Maria." You live in an apartment building filled with Jews, "oy vey" is bound to be part of your vocabulary.

Yet even though we don't have any difficulty associating Jewish humor with pessimism, or even a lot of stereotypes of Jews as being pessimists, I think the opposite is also often true. Seeing the glass as half full instead of half empty is certainly part of Jewish tradition and Jewish teaching. Really when you think about it, what are the chances that there would still be a Jewish people in the world if we weren't, at heart, optimists? It isn't just Jewish humor that sees this pessimist/optimist dynamic. It's all the ups and downs of Jewish history. And it's Torah.

This week's portion, Ki TaVO, is a good example of that push-pull of optimism and pessimism. That matter of attitude. As we enter yet another of these closing portions of the book of Deuteronomy, the closing portions of the whole Torah, we are met with yet another long litany of blessings and curses from Moses. If you do it right, says Moses to all the Israelites as he nears the end of his life, all these blessings will come to you. But if you do it wrong, note that the list of curses that will befall you is much much longer than the list of blessings.

The commentators pretty much agree about Moses' tactics here: Different people learn differently. Some learn to be good in response to the threats of punishment if they aren't; some learn to be good by virtue of the rewards promised if they are. And some people just are good, no matter the promised rewards or punishments for good or bad behavior. Moses tries speaking to all sorts of people at the end of his life. With little time left to get his message across, he tries every technique he can think of.

You know what I just said about some people learning to be good and some people just are good? The same is true, I suppose, about some people having a good attitude and some people learning to have a good attitude, and some people being unable even to learn to have a good attitude.

Take me, for example, even though I'm really good ...at thinking up worst case scenarios, I think I'm basically an optimistic person. Where does that come from? Well, I grew up with two parents who were both like that - so that helps. And then there's just experience - I've been pretty lucky in my life, not much

to complain about. And certainly as a Jew (and a lesbian for that matter), I've lived in this extraordinary window - as we all do - of place and time in which Jews have had more freedom and opportunity and less prejudice aimed at them than ever before in our history. I've grown up with a state of Israel, a Jewish homeland, a safe haven.

I've been thinking about this a lot lately - for a number of reasons, not the least of which it's looking like that window of opportunity might be closing, like we really might be entering a new era of anti-Jewishness in the world, of anti-Israel feelings anyway. If one did tend toward pessimism - which, I repeat, I do not - one might be feeling pessimistic about being a Jew these days.

But there are other reasons I have been thinking about all this lately too. Besides the Mayo Clinic's injunctions to "lighten up" and the upcoming yahrzeit of Sept. 11 (I wonder what would have happened had the Mayo Clinic released their study on Sept. 12 last year), another of the reasons I've been thinking about this pessimism optimism dynamic in Judaism is the fact that several of our members have recently become Jews (two of them did so yesterday as a matter of fact, and another one last week).

As I said earlier, I do think a lot of born Jews are, at heart, optimistic people, but the stereotypes and jokes of us being a - what shall we say? -- "negative sort of people"? still hold a tight grip at least on sit coms and Jewish stand up, and many born Jews have spent more than a little time in the office of therapists trying to overcome their in-bred negativity. But it occurs to me, who am blessed to know quite a sizeable number of Jews by choice, that many of them/you come to Judaism with a certain optimism already in place. In fact, many of them/you are drawn to Judaism in large measure precisely because of the optimistic/life affirming aspects that exist in Judaism. It is the "choose life" mentality, and the ethics and values that go with it, that has drawn them. That and the fact that you can get mad at God and still be a good Jew.

I for one, find these traits, these inclinations - the unmitigated optimism, the appreciation of life, the impulse to do tikkun olam - to make this world a better place - I find those inclinations to be among the most marvelous blessings that Jews by choice bring to our community. They/you affirm all the wonderful aspects of Judaism that the rest of us sometimes forget about, or at least fail to focus on. Which is not to say that Jews by choice are just 'cock-eyed optimists,' just some sort of Jewish Polyannas. It's merely to say that, as a group, Jews by choice take their Jewish values seriously. Jews by choice are quick - quicker than some born Jews - to take action to help repair the world, or to make their

synagogue a better place. Don't get me wrong. I'm NOT saying born Jews don't do those things. I'm NOT saying Jews by choice are better Jews than born Jews. I'm just saying certain stereotypes of Jews - certain traits that we see in many born Jews -- we see much less often in Jews by choice.

It makes a lot of sense if you think about it. Some of the negative stuff - the "woe is me," "oy vey" stereotypes might exist, and might be the stuff of humor and of real life, but they aren't things you'd choose to be if you have a choice. People who choose Judaism aren't doing so to join their destiny to a lachrymose people, or a pessimistic people, or a downtrodden people, or a sarcastic people - in short, most people won't go out of their way to sign up to be a glass-half-empty person. But to become part of a people known to be funny and talented and caring, a people who takes seriously its covenant with God to help make this world a better place - in short, to be part of a glass-half-full people - now that might appeal to someone who is herself/himself already so inclined.

I felt so blessed yesterday and last week - and proud - to bring before a few of my colleagues Steven Leider and Jack Elliot and Angela Brown - as they declared their intentions to become Jews. And you should feel proud too - all of you, for BCC has already become home to them, and they have already become invaluable members of our congregation.

Angela is going to speak to us at services next Friday night about her choice. Tonight you all get to witness and help bless Steven and Jack as they take one last step in their transition into Judaism, as they come before their community to declare their intentions and to receive from us a blessing.

And if by chance, you who are already Jewish are feeling a bit pessimistic about that fact, or less than ecstatic about it - I urge you to talk to any one of them and ask why they did what they did. If we could all embrace life and Judaism the way these three do, we could put an end to pessimism and in so doing, according to the Mayo Clinic anyway, look forward, to richer fuller longer lives . . . Or not.

Shabbat Shalom

I want to invite Jack and Steven to join me now on the bima. Let's recite together this verse from this week's Torah portion: Parashat Ki Tavo Deuteronomy 26:17 "You have proclaimed Adonai today to be God to you, and to go in God's ways and to observe God's laws, and God's commandments and

God's judgments and to listen to God's voice. ”