

## The Age of Pessimism

Moshe Taragin

Ever since we were liberated from Mitzrayim, we had heard glowing reports about a land of Hashem, which flowed with milk and honey. Having arrived at the doorstep of this magical land, we secretly dispatched twelve agents to gather intel and to determine the best entry strategy.

Everything our spies witnessed in Eretz Yisrael corroborated our expectations. Israel was not a typical land and everything about this country was outsized, beyond human imagination. The mammoth fruits were so colossal that it took eight men to carry one cluster of grapes. Fearsome giants roamed the land, capable of crushing any would-be trespassers under their boots. Evidently, these gigantic ogres weren't prepared to simply roll over and hand us their country. Life seemed unforgiving in this ruthless land, which appeared to devour its inhabitants. Nothing is ever as easy as it looks on paper, and entering the land of Hashem was no different.

Shuddering at the reports of the returning meraglim, we stood at a historical crossroads. We could optimistically place our trust in a Hashem who had emancipated us from Egypt and had split the ocean. Alternatively, we could take the pessimistic route, assuming the worst and caving to our dark fears. Sadly, we chose the cynical approach, rebelled against Moshe, and rerouted Jewish history for forty years. It all depends on how you spin it.

Our descent into gloomy pessimism was caused by loss of faith- both in Hashem and in ourselves. A year before the expedition of the spies we had betrayed Hashem by bowing to the egel. Though He had forgiven us, perhaps there were limits to His divine clemency. Suffering the lingering trauma of our national sins, we harbored severe reservations about whether would assist us in battling these insurmountable giants.

More significant than losing faith in Hashem, we lost faith in ourselves. In the weeks before this reconnaissance mission the nation was roiled by several jarring controversies, such as our immature complaining about meat and our nostalgic pining for the creature comforts of Egypt. After these controversies subsided, the slandering of Moshe by his own two

siblings further eroded confidence in his leadership. Our social fabric was quickly disintegrating and without confidence in our future, we sunk into dark pessimism, collapsing under the pressure of our fears.

Religious success depends upon delicately calibrating between doubt and optimism. Questioning ourselves and cross-examining our personal behavior enables honest self-introspection and religious improvement. By contrast, inflated self-confidence builds complacency and leads to religious apathy and stagnancy. Doubt preserves religious integrity.

Though doubt and uncertainty are vital for personal religious growth, pessimism and uncertainty about our collective future is religiously unhealthy. Essential to religious belief is an optimistic view of the future. Hashem established a historical covenant with our people guaranteeing our Jewish destiny. We may face temporary or even prolonged adversity, but Jewish destiny is inevitable. Excess pessimism about our future represents a deficiency of faith in Hashem. Emunah isn't meant to glaze over hardship or propose naïve assumptions that "everything will be all right". However, emunah should provide a bedrock of optimism for our long-term prospects.

#### The age of pessimism

We are currently surrounded by a culture of pessimism. Several anti-humanistic trends are weakening our belief in the future of humanity and are causing widespread pessimism. The first tide of pessimism is based upon environmental concerns about the unlimited growth of technology and how it is causing irreparable damage to our planet. This bleak outlook about the future is infecting modern culture with pessimism, convincing us that tomorrow will undoubtedly be worse than today. Astonishingly, some even assert that it is pointless and selfish to bring children into a world which will soon go extinct. Panic about global destruction is causing widespread anticipatory anxiety and is providing a gloomy outlook about our future on this planet. We obviously must do better to conserve planetary resources, but without demoralizing doomsday prophecies and without falling into pessimism.

Ironically the second current of modern pessimism, often referred to as techno-pessimism, is being driven by overconfidence in human technological prowess. Artificial Intelligence will completely reshape our

world and, potentially will help us transcend many of our human limits. Fusing artificial intelligence to human beings may allow us to increase our intelligence and faculties. Additionally, we may be able to create sentient beings that can travel to parts of outer space which currently lie beyond the limits of human travel. Down the line we may be able to preserve our minds or create new forms of intelligence.

Ironically, this supremely optimistic view of the future cheapens the value of human life. If we create beings of superior intelligence what does that say about human identity and about our future? As robots become more human, humans become more robotized. Perhaps, Darwin was right and, as the world evolves to produce higher beings, humans will be the next in line to go extinct. Perhaps we are creating our own extinction.

Environmentalists' alarms and swelled ambitions about enhanced reality, are combining to paint a bleak and pessimistic future for the creature of Hashem we call homo sapiens.

#### Israeli pessimism

Israelis have their own set of reasons to be pessimistic. Over the past year, life in Israel hasn't always been rosy. We have endured terrible internal strife which has shattered our national unity and torn apart our social fabric. In the past, as difficult as life has been in Israel, we always took solace in national unity as the great equalizer. We may have encountered difficult periods, but at least we faced the challenges together, as one family. There is nothing like being at home, even when adversity strikes. However, over the past year, it feels as if our home itself is burning. To make matters worse, our enemies have sensed our social vulnerability and have begun rattling the sabers of war. Over the past year, in Israel, there is much to be pessimistic about.

This is precisely where faith sets in. Faith in Hashem, the dignity of Man, and the destiny of Jewish history. Humans are the masterpiece of Hashem's creation gifted with divine image and personal dignity. As part of His concern for human welfare He guaranteed that our planet will not collapse, and that humanity will not go extinct. The divine promise of global sustainability does not absolve us from the moral duty of environmental conservation, but it does provide a baseline of confidence

about the future. We may develop advanced technology to create beings of higher intelligence of faculties, faculties but we alone possess a divinely endowed and immortal soul and we alone have been chosen by Hashem for moral experience and conscience.

As Jews we have been chosen not just for moral expectations but for historical covenant. For thousands of years, though dislocated from our homeland, we represented Hashem and His values. Our return to the land of Israel is an event of epic proportions and signals the beginning of the end of history. We know exactly how history concludes.

No one can determine exactly how the future will unfold, but faith belief stabilizes our confidence about the future and should help us repel the dark clouds of pessimism.

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