

How to Cultivate Positivity Bias

Imagine a day in which five good things happen to you, but then you step into a puddle and get your shoes muddy. If you were to consider your day ruined, this would be an example of negativity bias. We have a tendency to focus on negative experiences, even when they're relatively trivial. In contrast, when you think back on your day and your mind focuses on the good things that happened—a kind text from a friend, a compliment from your boss, a relaxing walk in the park—that's your positivity bias in action.

The positivity bias encourages a person to pay attention to the positives in life. Focusing on the positive will enhance your overall quality of life and can improve your emotional and mental health.

At the root of a positive attitude is gratitude—the fuel that helps power positive thoughts and actions. The attribute of gratitude is exemplified in the mitzvah of bikkurim—the offering of the first fruits of the land of Israel:

When you enter the land which G-d, your G-d, is giving you as an inheritance, you should take possession of it and settle it. Then you should take the first from every fruit of the ground, which you gather in from your land, that G-d, your G-d, is giving you. You should put it in a basket and go to the place which G-d, your G-d, will choose to make His name dwell there.

Notice that the words “G-d, your G-d” are repeated three times. Perhaps this is to emphasize that everything comes from G-d: the land, the harvest and the specific place in which G-d makes His name dwell. This repetition connects all the good to the same, unified, source—“your G-d.” It fortifies our consciousness of G-d as a crescendo of recognition that culminates in appreciation.

Maimonides² suggests an enlightening idea regarding the verbal declaration recited by every farmer when offering his first fruits: “And now, behold, I have brought the first fruits of the land which you, G-d, has given me.”

When living in material comfort, a person may become prone to haughtiness. Acknowledging that G-d is the primary source of one's success is pivotal to maintaining an attitude of gratitude, and bringing the first fruits served as a reminder.

What If Things Are Not Great?

But what if one's harvest wasn't bountiful? What if the farmer sees others who clearly have much more? “You shall rejoice with all the goodness that G-d, your G-d, has given you and your household.”⁴ A person must focus on the good that he or she has.

Lasting happiness is not determined by money or possessions. Many people with large bank accounts are still unhappy. Despite their wealth, they remain disappointed and depressed. People can squander their lives, convinced that they don't have enough.

Appreciating the good in one's life begins with gratitude for life itself. Waking up in the morning means that G-d has a reason for you to be alive. What is that reason, and how can you best actualize it today?

The unhappiest people are often self-absorbed. They've become constricted by the negative way they perceive their own circumstances. Feeling and expressing gratitude expands us to include and interact positively with others.

Developing Gratitude

Feeling grateful may not come naturally to you, but it can be developed, cultivated and maintained, just like a garden. By emphasizing the good, you'll come to feel gratitude.

From reciting the “Modeh Ani” prayer upon awakening, to mindfully reciting blessings before and after eating and even after going to the bathroom, we have numerous opportunities each day to practice gratitude and cultivate our awareness of the good G-d bestows upon us. The thrice-daily prayer services—morning, afternoon, and evening—also all focus on being grateful.

Why the emphasis? Because it's so easy to forget and fall victim to our negativity bias.

The mitzvah of bikkurim contains life-enriching lessons. Here are two to consider:

Making a verbal declaration of gratitude enhances the experience, making it more tangible;

Share your gratitude with others. When the Holy Temple stood, Jews left their homes and traveled to Jerusalem with their bikkurim. Their gratitude was expressed both individually and collectively.

The positivity bias is generally stronger in older adults. Studies have found that as people age, they tend to remember more positive than negative information. Perhaps this is due to the wisdom that only age can bring. But why wait until you are older if you can benefit from increased positivity now?

The Rebbe was known to advise people, “Think good and it will be good.” Positive thinking is the Jewish way.

Making It Relevant

What are you grateful for today? State it aloud and write it down.

When you get together with friends, initiate the practice of having each person share something positive that happened that day or something for which they are grateful.

Sanctify your first waking moment each day by expressing your gratitude to G-d for your life. Then visualize your goals for the day and strive to actualize them.

Before relating any negative experience or anything that you feel that you lack, start by stating two things for which you are grateful.

By Katia Bolotin

Phishing for the Soul

An email popped up in my work inbox. “Please click here for an important

Calendars

We have Jewish Calendars. If you would like one, please send us a letter and we will send you one, or ask the Rabbi/Chaplain to contact us.

Family Programs

Do you have family on the outside struggling? Please contact or have them contact our office to learn more about our family programs. You and they are not alone, we are here to help.

Grape Juice & Matzoh

We offer free Grape Juice and Matzoh for you to be able to make the blessings every Shabbos. Please have your chaplain / Rabbi contact us to enroll (available to all prisons).

Sacred material please do not desecrate

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No One Forgotten.

voice message.” My heart leaped up in my chest. Had I been remiss in something? Was this a warning about my work performance? With great trepidation, I clicked on the link. An alert popped up: This email was a systems test to prevent hacking and phishing attacks. I had almost fallen into a trap.

The dangers of phishing cannot be overstated. Phishing is how hackers are able to penetrate the most secure systems—major chain stores, banks, hospitals and government agencies. All it takes is one employee to carelessly click on a link or enter their ID and password, and a hacker can gain entry into the entire system.

The same way our inboxes get flooded with spam, our brains are spammed throughout the day with a bombardment of random thoughts, impulses and desires. Like our inboxes, our brains have filters that allow us to divert our attention from distractors in order to devote our full attention to the matter at hand. We can learn to ignore information that’s irrelevant or counterproductive.

A phishing attack is different. Phishing attempts take advantage of the very mechanism that we rely on for filtering out spam: our conscientiousness; our desire to do the right thing. “Attention: You have an important message from work!”

Uh, oh. If my work is calling, I need to pay attention. I can’t ignore this. I’d better click on the link.

What is phishing for the soul? We’ve grown to the point that the evil inclination has already learned that we’re going to ignore overt appeals to our baser instincts. The emails promising me romantic love or millions of dollars from my Nigerian uncle will go straight into the junk file. So the evil inclination tugs at us in a different way. “I have an important message for you! You’re not doing a good enough job! You’re failing!”

Here is how it works:

The Torah portion of Ki Tavo enumerates the most dreadful-sounding curses that will come upon the Jewish people if they fail to serve G-d properly. The section concludes with these words: “These will fall upon you because you did not serve G-d with joy and goodness of heart.”

Chassidic teachings explain that the emphasis is on the words “joy and goodness of heart.” The evil inclination does its best to rob us of our joy in serving G-d, thus leaving us vulnerable to the worst threats.

How do we phish-proof ourselves? We need to stay alert to the tricks of the evil inclination. Even when it presents itself as the voice of our conscience, telling us that we’re not good enough and that we must be better, we need to stop and think: Is this thought really for my benefit? Is this thought going to uplift me or inspire me to do my work with a sense of joy?

This precaution against spiritual phishing is especially important during the month of Elul, when we take stock of the past year and prepare for the new one. It’s a somber month that can easily lead to thoughts of anxiety and inadequacy. Therefore, we need to take every precaution not to allow ourselves to lapse into melancholy. The month of Elul is also a joyous time when G-d’s love and compassion predominates, when He graciously welcomes our every overture to return to Him.

G-d isn’t looking for our sadness, our fear or our sorrow. All He wants is to connect with us. He awaits even the smallest gesture on our part to open ourselves up to His overflowing blessings for a good and sweet year.

By Chaya Shuchat

IN JEWISH HISTORY

Sunday, September 12, 2027

10 Elul, 5787

Noah Dispatches Raven (2105 BCE)

On the 10th of Elul of the year 1656 from creation (2105 BCE), as the Great Flood neared its end, Noah opened the window of the Ark and dispatched a raven to determine if the flood waters had begun to recede (Genesis 8:1; Rashi). For a discussion of the deeper significance of this event, see The Window.

Monday, September 13, 2027

11 Elul, 5787

Completion of Beit Yosef (1542)

In 1522, Rabbi Yosef Caro started writing the Beit Yosef, his famous commentary on the Arba Turim, Yaakov Ben Asher’s comprehensive Halachic code. He started writing this commentary in Adrianople, Turkey, and continued for the next twenty years, during which time he relocated to Safed, Israel. He completed the monumental work on the 11th of Elul. It took another ten years for the writings to be published.

Tuesday, September 14, 2027

12 Elul, 5787

Sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe visits US (1929)

On the 12th of Elul (September 16) of 1929, two years after escaping a death sentence imposed upon him by the Russian Communist regime and his subsequent departure from that country, the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, arrived in New York for a ten-month tour of the United States. In the course of his stay the Rebbe visited the Jewish communities in New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Chicago, Detroit, Milwaukee, S. Louis, Boston and several other communities, and was received by President Hoover at the White House. The purpose of the Rebbe’s visit was twofold: a) to bring the plight of Russian Jewry to the attention of the American Jewish community and raise funds for the Rebbe’s efforts on its behalf; b) to improve the state of Yiddishkeit (Torah-true Judaism) in America and strengthen the ties of the American Chabad-Chassidic community with the Rebbe. The Rebbe also wished to explore the possibility of settling in the U.S. and establishing the headquarters of Chabad there; though he did not decide to do so at that time, his 1929 visit laid the foundations for his move to New York in 1940 and the revolutionary changes he wrought in American Jewish life.

Tuesday, September 14, 2027

12 Elul, 5787

Nachmanides Born (1194)

Birth of Nachmanides ("Ramban", Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, 1194-1270) -- Torah scholar, Kabbalist, philosopher, physician and Jewish leader -- in Gerona, Spain, in the year 4954 from creation.

Wednesday, September 15, 2027

13 Elul, 5787

R. Yosef Yitzchak's marriage (1897)

Marriage of the 6th Rebbe of Chabad-Lubavitch, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn (1880-1950), to Rebbetzin Nechamah Dinah (1882-1971).

Friday, September 17, 2027

15 Elul, 5787

Tomchei Temimim founded (1897)

The Yeshivah "Tomchei Temimim Lubavitch", the first to integrate the "revealed" part of Torah (Talmud and Halachah) with the esoteric teachings of Chassidism in a formal study program, was on this date founded by the fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Sholom DovBer Schneersohn.