The Jewish Secret--Optimism: Thoughts for Parashat Ekev

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Ekev

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

The first word of this week's Parasha is "vehaya"--and it will be. The 18th century Moroccan Jewish sage, Rabbi Hayyim Benattar, notes in his commentary Or ha-Hayyim, that this word implies happiness. He would interpret the first verse of the Parasha to mean: if you will be careful in keeping the ordinances [of the Torah] and you will observe and fulfill them--then you will be happy! God will fulfill His covenant as He promised to your ancestors. In elaborating on this theme, Rabbi Benattar stresses that our observance and study of Torah should be marked by a spirit of joy.

But the message goes beyond observance and study of Torah. A positive worldview enables us to deal with the ups and downs of life with greater confidence and satisfaction.

I recall a member of our congregation who always seemed to have a smile on his face, a good word for everyone, a spirit of kindliness. Yet, his life had included no shortage of sufferings and setbacks. He came to the United States as an immigrant and had to adapt to a new country, a new language, and a new social context. He started a business that was sometimes flourishing and sometimes not doing as well. He had various problems with his family members. In one of my conversations with him, he offered words of wisdom: “turn the page.”

“Turn the page.” Don’t waste time and energy fretting over what you could have done or should have done. Don’t let past failures and frustrations hold you back. Life is a book, turn the page and start writing anew. When one “turns the page,” one does not forget or deny the past; but one realizes that life goes on. Strengthen yourself, trust yourself, smile…and start writing the next page.

Another of our congregants was celebrating the bar mitzvah of her son. When she spoke, she turned to her parents who had survived the Holocaust: “Mom and Dad, you are not survivors; you are winners!” Her parents overcame horrendous sufferings and challenges…and yet they were able to “turn the page” and start a new life, create a lovely family, and be active members of the Jewish community. They did not focus on being survivors…but on being “winners,” people determined to build a better life for themselves, their families and society in general.

When we faced challenging times, my father of blessed memory would say in Judeo-Spanish: “ya la pasa,” this too will pass. Don’t let frustrations or failures break your spirit; you will get through this and you will be stronger for having overcome adversity.

A positive worldview helps us to see beyond the negatives of life, to aspire and work for a better future. Optimism is one of the secrets of Jewish success!