

**Search for the Positive**  
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**Shoftim**  
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As the month of Elul begins, I hope everyone has had a nice summer. Labor Day is behind us and we return and re-engage in normal flow of life. As this year starts, I would like to challenge all of us to focus our year-long perspective guided by a wonderful lesson from the Talmud.

Back in the year 136 CE, after the failure of the Bar Kochbah revolt, Rabbi Simon bar Yochai and his son Rabbi Elazar were condemned to death by Rome. Rather than die they went into hiding. For 12 years they hid in a cave immersed in study and prayer. They were nourished by a carob tree and well that supplied fresh water. At the end of the 12th year, the prophet Elijah appeared and announced: the Roman emperor is dead. The decree against you has been annulled.

When the Rabbis emerged from the cave they found that people were engaged in ordinary pursuits: plowing, sowing, and making a living. The two Rabbis were enraged. They were upset that people were not praying and studying. It appeared to them that the people had turned their backs on God and Torah. Everything they saw was a problem. They had become negative and their voices reflected a very depressing world view.

Seeing this, God called out to them: "Did you emerge to destroy my world? If that is your attitude go back to your cave!" And they did, this time for 12 months until God gave them permission to come out again.

This time what did they see? They saw the same thing. People were working. They however framed their understanding differently. People were working ... hurrying to prepare for Shabbat. They saw that Israel still loved the *mitzvot* and they were comforted.

The world had not really changed. It was their perspective that had changed. The first time around, Rabbis Shimon and Elazar chose to see things through their own negative prism. They were bitter and their negativity had the potential to destroy the world. As wise as they were, as smart as they were, attitude mattered. They looked at good people trying to do the right thing ... and all they could see was sin.

During their extra 12 months in the cave, they learned to readjust their way of looking at things. Above all, they stopped seeing the world through their own self-righteousness.

How we look at the world is a question worthy of consideration as we return from the summer and focus on the coming year. Can we be less critical? Can we learn to focus on the positive and use the positive as a source to inspire growth and change?

When we are negative we don't just harm others, we harm ourselves as well. The more critical our attitude to others, the more we find ourselves incapable of opening our own hearts to relationship. When we accustom ourselves to searching out the flaws in others, we blind ourselves to their good points.

How many of us want to be with people that we know are looking for weakness? If we know someone is generally critical, we probably shy away from that person's company. This doesn't mean that criticism is never justified. However, we must take care, because all too often, our criticism isn't as constructive as we think.

Search for the positive! Highlight the good! Everyone has good qualities. As we begin this year, I hope we can commit to reach out to others with kindness. Kindness will lead not only to blessing, but hopefully to joy and understanding and a year filled with deep meaning.