

Saturday Night Live debuted a new character in 2004 played by Rachel Dratch. The character would appear 7 times before Dratch left the show in 2006 and she reprised the role for special appearances three times in the 2010s.

The character was Debbie Downer – the ultimate pessimist. You can count on Debbie to bring down the mood, to find the negative in anything.

In the original Debbie Downer sketch on a family trip to Disney when someone is excited about visiting the different nations of Epcot, there's Debbie Downer. Debbie says "did you hear about that train explosion in North Korea? The media is so secretive there that they may never know how many people perished."

At Thanksgiving Dinner, she asks the host if he cooked his stuffing in the turkey. He says "ya it soaks up all the juices!" But there's Debbie Downer who replies "it also soaks up an array of harmful bacteria creating a breeding ground for foodborne illnesses."

At a wedding reception, when she questions if another guest is single, There's Debbie Downer – she says "he's handsome, smart and charming... of course so was Ted Bundy."

Debbie Downer shows pictures from her tour of the Holocaust Museum over dinner and Debbie Downer talks about low birth weights while riding the tea cups at It's a Small World.

In almost every Debbie Downer sketch, the cast breaks character, unable to hold in their laughter as time after time, no matter the topic of conversation or the setting,

Debbie has something oppressively negative to say.

Debbie can take anything anyone says, even the purest, sweetest, most optimistic, positive and heartfelt of moments and just bury it in negativity.

Satirical comedy like Debbie Downer speaks to us because it accentuates reality, it highlights the absurdity of our nature.

Debbie Downer became a favorite sketch and “debbie downer” became a term that’s a part of our vernacular because she embodies one of our less than attractive collective traits – our capacity for negativity.

To only see the bad. To fixate on what’s wrong.
To go looking for the downside.

This tendency towards the negative has been studied in psychological research – negativity is a fundamental tool we use in processing the world.

Studies have concluded that negative stimuli are perceived to carry greater informational value than the positive.

As we try to absorb as much information as we can and to make informed decisions, we dedicate more attention and cognitive energy towards the negative.

The studies suggest that consistently, we actually weigh negatives more heavily than positives in our decision making processes – we value the cons over the pros.

There is distinct asymmetry in how adults process and use positive and negative. Advanced imaging has shown that our brains are more active in response to negative stimulus than to positive.

The negative has greater psychological impact on us and the negativity bias in adults is “one of the most basic and far-reaching psychological principles.”¹

This negativity bias and its impact have been well researched, but the origin of this prioritization of the negative still remains undetermined.

Where does it come from?

Along the trajectory of our development from infancy to adulthood, we learn to synthesize the world this way.

We’re taught to take in information from negative stimuli and allow that to inform future decision making and judgements.

And there are things that are important about that, that help us process the world.

The research is clear that negativity is psychologically and perhaps even biologically important to us.

But we also know that negativity can be... negative.

Negativity can be oppressive. And draining.

Negativity can be the elephant on our chest or the heavy weight around our ankle dragging us down.

Nobody likes Debbie Downer because she is so deeply negative.

At the end of every Debbie Downer sketch, the other characters eventually get up and walk away – she’s just too negative.

Nobody wants to get stuck in the negative for themselves or to have negativity projected on to them.

¹ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3652533/>

In the last year, I have struggled with this.

One year and three days ago Matthew and I learned we were pregnant.

We were filled with joy, excited about bringing this very wanted life into the world.

We of course had the normal nerves at the cusp of this major change,

not sure what life would be like,

hoping both baby and I would be healthy through pregnancy and birth,

worried about how we'd be as parents.

But as we settled into the reality that God willing we'd soon be a family of 3,

we were really happy.

As I entered my second trimester and we began to share the news, people were of course excited for us... but I was taken aback by the negativity that started to creep in.

I'd yawn and someone would say "oh sleep now... you won't sleep again for 18 years."

I'd share a photo of a nice dinner I'd cooked for us and receive the message - "ha! you'll never have time to cook again."

As the months carried on, over and over I'd hear the words "just wait" followed by something negative that someone was certain was coming our way.

But what I longed to hear was:

"just wait until he holds your finger"

"just wait for the first time he looks up at you and smiles"

"just wait for the joy of watching your partner become a parent"

But what I often heard was just wait for all of these negative things that are about to consume you.

And now that our son Matan is here and people ask how we're doing, when the answer is "we're doing great! What a wonderful little human he is. We're having a lot of fun"

We hear "oh just wait... that will change."

Yes, there are moments that are really hard

when you don't understand why this tiny helpless being is crying and crying...

and crying

and will not stop

when you feel grossly inadequate and ill-equipped...

and - most of the time we're really loving this journey.

Feeling awe at the immense privilege to raise this little person up to be a big person who hopefully will do good in the world.

But again, overwhelmingly what comes back is negative.

"Oh he sleeps at night? That will stop."

"Oh you bring him places with you? Enjoy it now - it will be impossible soon."

Maybe people think they're being helpful and supportive...

that by prying our eyes open to what they perceive will become our reality it will make future challenges more tolerable.

And maybe they're right about what's coming.

Mostly though, I think people don't even really mean what they're saying.

They don't even realize what they're saying,
the negativity they're sharing with hopeful, vulnerable new parents.

It's just sort of... what you say.

Almost a reflex.

Involuntary. Automatic.

We go to the negative...

We obscure an opportunity for joy without necessarily even realizing it.

Science and psychology tell us that we need negativity.

We need this negative baseline for understanding our world.

The problem is not only when that negativity is transposed onto others but moreso,
when the negativity is not conscious, when it's just what we say and what we do.

When it seeps up from our pores, when it radiates from our souls, when it comes out
of our mouths and is shared with others... and we don't even know it.

In Genesis 28 we have the words "we don't even know it" but in the singular –
v'anochi lo yadati – and I didn't even know it.

Jacob is on a journey and on his way he lays down to sleep. He has an elaborate
dream – a stairway ascending to the heavens, Jacob's ladder.

He dreams God is standing beside him and makes great promises about his
descendants spreading all over the world with God's protection.

Jacob wakes up from his slumber and says "yesh Adonai bamakom hazeh v'anochi lo
yadati – God was in this place and I didn't even know it."

V'anochi lo yadati – and I didn't even know it.

This is one of my favorite lines of the entire Torah

So much so that I have the words engraved on this tiny ring on my pinky.

I've always been moved by Jacob's awe at finding God.

At acknowledging his own vulnerability that he doesn't in fact know everything.

But if we look at this a little differently, we could ask – WHY didn't he know? Why didn't he know that God was there?

Certainly, we can't all know everything there is to know in the world and we are all always learning...

and... COULD Jacob have known that God was there?

Was he fully aware and conscious?

Was he really open to the possibility of God's presence?

Jacob was on a journey when he had his dream.

He was on his way to Padan-aram to find a wife... but he was also fleeing.

He was leaving his home.

The Torah tells us that Jacob and his twin brother Esau were rivals from the very moment of their conception.

Esau the first born, came into this world with Jacob literally on his heels, trying to climb his way to first place – the place of the firstborn and the place of the favored son in their father Isaac's eyes.

But Esau was born first and with his birthright came the opportunity to serve God and to carry on their father's legacy.

As Esau, a hunter, came in from the field one day he was faint with hunger. He asked Jacob to share with him some of his lentil soup.

Jacob said he would sell Esau the soup – the price was his birthright.

Esau was so famished, so exhausted that he dramatically said what use is this birthright if I'm about to die from this hunger.

And so in a forced, life and death sale Jacob inherits Esau's birthright.

When their father Isaac is on his deathbed, Jacob elaborately tricks his old, ailing father into giving him a blessing intended for Esau.

Jacob cheats his brother yet again,

and Esau vows that after the mourning period for their father ends, he will set out to kill his brother in revenge.

Rebekah, their mother, hears Esau's words and sends Jacob away,

sends him to Padan-aram to find a wife and to find protection from his bitterly angry brother Esau.

This is the journey Jacob is on when he has his dream.

Less of an adventure and more of a flight,
running away from rather than running to.

Jacob is fleeing a storm of anger and hurt and revenge and overwhelming negativity when he finds himself so exhausted he has to rest.

He is so worn from the weight of what's happened that he takes a rock as a pillow to sleep.

And as he sleeps he dreams of God and wakes and says "yesh Adonai bamakom hazeh v'anochi lo yadati – wow... God was in this place and I didn't even know it."

V'anochi lo yadati – I didn't even know it.

He almost missed out on God's presence in his life because he was so consumed by the negative.

Jacob was so focused on the negative, on the absence, on what he DIDN'T have that he was missing the possibility for positive.

There was so much negativity surrounding him that he wasn't paying attention to the moment he was in.

And he almost missed it.

He almost missed God.

If we aren't conscious, the negativity can overtake.

And if we allow negativity to overtake us, we might let things pass us by.

If we aren't conscious, we miss opportunities for joy.

We miss wonder.

We miss God.

V'anochi lo yadati – and we might not even know we're missing it.

There will always be time for the negativity,

a time for negative experiences and thoughts to give us information and influence our perspective and impress upon us what we need it to...

We don't need to give more space to negativity than it will already demand from us.

In just 10 days on Yom Kippur we will stand before God in judgement and read from the Torah that God said:

I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day – I have set before you

hachayim v'hamavet life and death, blessing and curse

Uvacharta vachayim

And you shall choose life.

God has put this choice before us between
life and death,
blessing and curse,
joy and suffering,
between positive and negative.

Uvacharta vachayim – and you shall choose life.

You shall choose joy.

You shall choose to bring positive to someone else's life.

You shall choose to bring positive to your own life.

Uvacharta vachayim - and you shall choose life.

The Torah doesn't say LIVE life. That could be passive.

It's clear – CHOOSE life.

Make a choice. Choose to live. Do not let it pass you by.

Do not let this new year 5783 pass you by.

Do not wake up next Rosh Hashanah sitting in this same chair

and say “yesh Adonai bamakom hazeh v'anochi lo yadati – God was in this place and

I didn't even know it.”

Be conscious.

Guard against the negative.

And in 5783

may we all have the strength to choose life.

Kein y'hi ratzon, may this be God's will.