

By Joel M. Bernstein, M.D., Ph.D.

The episode of the spies has rightly puzzled commentators throughout the centuries. How could they have got it so wrong? It is, of course, very important to emphasize that we are talking about 10 spies, and not Caleb from the tribe of Judah and Joshua from the tribe of Ephraim, who had his name changed by Moses, from Hosea to Joshua by prepending a yud before the heh and thus inserting the name of God by Moses so that he would not be influenced by the 10 other leaders of the tribes. The land, they said, was as Moses had promised at least four times in the Torah that it would be conquered as God had told Moses. It was indeed “flowing with milk and honey”. But conquering it was impossible. “The people who live there are powerful, and the city is fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of giants there; we cannot attack these people. They are stronger than we are. All of the people we saw there are of great size. We saw the Titans there. We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes and so we seem in theirs. (Numbers 13:28-33). My sources for today’s D’var Torah are Maimonides, Rabbi Jonathon Sacks and most importantly, Chasidic commentary on this Parsha, particularly from the late Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson.

The 10 spies were terrified of the inhabitants of the land and entirely failed to realize that the inhabitants were actually terrified of them. In today’s Haftorah, Rahab, the prostitute in Jericho, tells the two spies that Joshua sent to spy the land a generation later, “I know that the Lord has given you this land and that a great fear of you has fallen on us so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you; our hearts melted in fear and everyone’s courage failed because of you, for the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below. (Joshua 2:10-11).

The truth was exactly the opposite of the spies’ report. The inhabitants feared the Israelites more than the Israelites feared the inhabitants.

We hear this at the start of the story of Bilaam, “Now Balak, son of Zippor, saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites, and Moab who was terrified because there were so many people. Indeed, Moab was filled with dread because of the Israelites.” (Balak, 2-4). Earlier, the Israelites themselves had sung at the Red Sea: “The people of Canaan will melt away; terror and dread will fall on them.” (Exodus 15: 15-16).

How then did the spies err so egregiously? Did they misinterpret what they saw? Did they lack faith in God? Did they more likely lack faith in themselves? Or was it simply as Maimonides argues in Guide to the Perplexed, that their fear was inevitable given their past history. They have spent most of their lives as slaves. Only recently had they acquired their freedom. They were not yet ready to fight a prolonged series of battles and establish themselves as a free people in their own land. That would take a new generation, born in freedom. Humans change, but not quickly. (Guide to the Perplexed, chapter 3, verse 32).

Most of the commentators assume that the spies were guilty of a failure of nerve or faith or both. It is hard to read the text otherwise. However, in the Hassidic literature from the Baal Shem Tov to Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter Gar to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, an entirely different line of interpretation emerged; reading the text against the grain took dramatic effect so that it remains relevant and powerful today. According to their interpretation, the spies were well-intentioned. They were, after all, princes, chieftains, and leaders. (Numbers 13: 2-3). They did not doubt that Israel could win its battle with the

inhabitants of the land. They did not fear failure; they feared success. Their concern was not physical but spiritual. They did not want to leave the wilderness. They did not want to become just another nation among nations of the earth. They did not want to lose that unique relationship to God in the reverberating silence of the desert; far removed from civilization and its discontents.

Here, they were close to God; closer than any generation before or since. He was a palpable presence in the Sanctuary in their midst and the clouds of glory that surrounded them. Here, His people ate manna from heaven and water from the rock and experienced miracles daily. So long as they stayed in the desert under God's sheltering canopy, they did not need to plow the earth, plant seeds, gather harvests, defend their country, run an economy, maintain a welfare system, or shoulder any of the other earthly burdens and distractions that takes people's minds away from the Divine.

Here, in no man's land in luminal space, suspended between the past and future, they were able to live with the simplicity and directness of encounter they could not hope to find once they had re-enacted to the gravitational pull of everyday life in the material world. Paradoxically, since a desert is normally the exact opposite of a garden, the wilderness was the Israelite's Eden. Here, they were as close to God as were the first humans before their loss of innocence.

If that comparison is too discordant, recall that Hosea and Jeremiah both compared the wilderness to a honeymoon. Hosea said in the name of God, "I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her" (Hosea 2:16), implying that in the future, God would take the people back there to celebrate a second honeymoon. Jeremiah said in God's name, "I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the wilderness, through a land not sown." (Jeremiah 2:2).

For both prophets, the wilderness years were the time of the first love between God and the Israelites. That is what the spies did not want to leave.

Clearly, this interpretation is not the plain sense of the narrative, but we should not dismiss it on that account. It is, as it were, a psychoanalytical reading, an account of the unconscious mindset of the spies. They did not want to let go of the intimacy and innocence of childhood and enter the adult world. Sometimes it is hard for parents to let go of their children; and others it is the other way around. But there must be a measure of separation if children are to become responsible adults. Ultimately, the spies feared freedom and its responsibilities.

But that is what Torah is all about. Judaism is not a religion of monastic retreat from the world. It is supremely a religion of engagement with the world. The Torah is a template for the construction of a society with all its gritty details; laws of warfare and welfare, harvests and livestock, loans and employer/employee relationships, the code of a nation and its land, part of the real world of politics and economics, yet somehow pointing to a better world where justice and compassion, love of the neighbor and stranger, are not remote ideals but part of the texture of everyday life. (Rabbi Sacks's concepts)

*God chose Israel to make His presence visible in the world, and that means that Israel must live in the world.*

To be sure, the Jewish people were not without their desert dwellers and aesthetics. The Qumran sect known to us from the Dead Sea Scrolls was such a group. The Talmud speaks of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai in similar

terms. Having lived for 13 years in a cave, he could not bear to see people engaged in such earthly pursuits as plowing the field.

Maimonides speaks of people who live as hermits in the desert to escape the corruptions of society; but these were the exceptions, not the rule. This is not the destiny of Israel; to live outside time and space in monasteries as the world's recluses. Far from being the supreme height of faith, such a fear of freedom and its responsibilities is, according to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, – *the sin of the spies*.

There is a voice within the tradition most famously identified with Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai that regards engagement with the world as fundamentally incompatible with the heights of spirituality. But the mainstream held otherwise. "Torah study without an occupation will, in the end, fail and lead to sin." (Pirkei Avot, chapter 2, paragraph 2).

Maimonides states, "One who makes his mind up to study Torah and not to work but to live on charity profanes the name of God, brings the Torah into contempt, extinguishes the light of religion, brings evil upon himself and deprives himself of life hereafter.

The spies did not want to contaminate Judaism by bringing it into contact with the real world. They sought the eternal childhood of God's protection and the endless honeymoon of His all-embracing love. There is something noble about this desire, but also something profoundly irresponsible that demoralized the people and provoked God's anger.

For the Jewish project, the Torah, as the constitution of the Jewish nation under the sovereignty of God; is about building a society in the land of Israel that so honors human dignity and freedom that it will one day lead the world to say, "Surely, this great nation is a wise and understanding people." (Deuteronomy 4:6).

The Jewish task is not to fear the real world, but to enter and transform it. That is what the spies did not understand. Do we; Jews of faith; understand it even now?

As Dr. Carol Dweck states in her famous book *Mindset, The New Psychology of Success*, published in 2006, and carrying her philosophy into today's parsha, the story of the spies holds a significant message for us. God does not ask us never to fail. He asks us that we give our best. He lifts us when we fall and forgives us when we fail. It is this mindset that Dr. Dweck calls the GROWTH MINDSET that gives us the courage to take risks. That is what Joshua and Caleb knew; one through a name change, the other through the experience of his ancestor, the greatest Baal Teshuva in the Torah, Judah. Hence the paradoxical but deeply liberating truth—fear of failure causes us to fail, again what Dr. Dweck calls the FIXED MINDSET. It is the willingness to fail and try again that allows us to succeed.

Shabbat Shalom