

Commentary on The Parsha Shelach Lecha

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

It is always a sincere source of pleasure to have the honor of delivering a Drash on the Parsha of the week.

Several weeks ago, Rabbi Netter delivered a truly inspiring sermon on Parsha Naso. He focused on the Berachot Ha Cohanim, the threefold Priestly Benediction. His point was that the priests did not have any unusual powers. They were simply the conduit from God to the People. He then focused on the cantor and quite remarkably, himself. The humility of the Rabbi was reflected in his statement that he, the Rabbi, did not have any special powers or knowledge that cannot be acquired by any of us. Although I doubt that, he did give us the metaphor of Isaac Stern, answering the man who asked him the question of how he was such an accomplished musician and Isaac Stern answered by the statement, "If you worked 13 hours a day on this instrument, you could also be a very good violinist." The Rabbi then concluded with the idea that in Judaism, everything is knowable, and it is how hard we work at something that gives us the knowledge to be very good in what we do.

In reviewing the overwhelming number of commentaries on this week's Parsha, particularly in regard to the Spies, I came upon a commentary by Sir Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of Great Britain and a book written by Carol Dweck, Professor of Psychology at Stanford University. The book is entitled, "Mind Set, the New Psychology of Success", which was published in 2006. Because I have read this book and I was fascinated by the Chief Rabbi's commentary on the spies in which he used Dr. Dweck's philosophy, I have chosen to compare Caleb and Joshua with a certain mindset and the ten spies that gave a negative report to both Moses and the Children of Israel had another mindset. In addition to the mindset concept which is perhaps an educational and psychological approach to why the spies could not give a good report, there is also a more orthodox idea which has been passed down from the Hassidic generation as to why the spies failed to give a good report. This drash appeared in the Jewish Review yesterday and I urge all of you to read this. The theme is that the 10 scouts who rejected conquering the land of Israel were so spiritual and did not want to give up this closeness to God and rejected working the land as farmers. Thus they actually feared success.

Did God send the spies out or did Moses send the spies out? Rashi considers that the people asked Moses to send spies out to the land and that Moses asked God and simply said, "Shelach lecha", go for yourself. In other words, it wasn't necessarily God's idea to spy the land. He had already told the Children of Israel that they

would conquer the land. So why is it that the spies, at least 10 of them, could not come back with a favorable report? They actually came back with the whole misleading report. They said, “We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we.” Then it continues, “The land through which we have gone as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people who we saw in it are men of great stature.” (Numbers 13:31-32).

In fact, as we later discover in today’s Haftorah, in the Book of Joshua, the inhabitants of the land were terrified of the Israelites. When Joshua sent spies to Jericho, Rahab told them, “A great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you.” When the people heard what God had done for the Israelites, “Our hearts melted in fear and everyone’s courage failed because of you.” (Joshua 2:9-11). The spies should have known this. They themselves had sung at the Red Sea, “The people of Canaan melted away; terror and dread fell upon them.” (Exodus 15: 15-16).

The spies were guilty of an attribution error, assuming that others felt as they did. They asked, “We were like grasshoppers in our own eyes and so we were in their eyes.” (Numbers 13:33). But as the Kotzker Rebbe noted, they were entitled to make the first claim, but not the second. They knew how they felt. They had no idea how the people of the land felt. There were terrified of the Canaanites and failed to see that the Canaanites were actually terrified of them.

But there are two obvious questions; first, why did the 10 spies make this mistake? Second, why did two of them, Joshua and Caleb, not make it?

As I mentioned above, Stanford University psychologist Carol Dweck has written a fascinating book, called “Mindset” on why some people fulfill their potential while others do not. Her interest, she says, was aroused when she observed the behavior of 10 year-old children when given puzzles to solve. Some, when the puzzles became difficult, thrived. They relished the challenge, even when it proved too hard for them. Others became anxious; when the puzzles became hard, they were easily discouraged. She wanted to understand why; what makes the difference between people who enjoy being tested and those who don’t? What makes some people grow through adversity, while others become demoralized? Her research drove her to the conclusion that it is a matter of mindset. Some see their abilities as given and unalterable; when we are just gifted or ordinary, and there is not much we can do about it. She calls this “the fixed mindset”. Others believe that we grow through our

efforts. When they fail, they don't define this as failure but is a learning experience and she calls this "the growth mindset". Those with a fixed mindset tend to avoid difficult challenges because they fear failure. They think it will expose them as inadequate. So, they are reluctant to take risks; they play it safe. People with the growth mindset react differently. They don't just seek challenge, they thrive on it. The bigger the challenge, the more they stretch.

When do people with the fixed mindset thrive? When things are safely within their grasp. If things are too challenging, they lose interest. The fixed mindset lives with the constant fear of failure. The growth mindset doesn't think in terms of failure at all.

Now, if we apply this logic to the spies, we can see something very fascinating. The Torah describes them in these words, "All were men of standing. They were heads of the Israelites. (Numbers 13:3). They were people with reputations to guard. Others had high expectations of them. They were princes, leaders, men of renown. If Dr. Dweck is correct, people laden with expectations tend to be risk-averse. They do not want to be seen to fail. That may be why they came back and said, in effect, we cannot win against the Canaanites. Therefore, we should not even try.

But there were two exceptions: Caleb and Joshua. Caleb came from the tribe of Judah. Judah who is my favorite character in all of Genesis, except for perhaps Joseph, we learn the book of Bereishit was the first Baal Teshuvah. Early in life, he had been the one who proposed selling Joseph into slavery, but he matured. He was taught a lesson by his daughter-in-law Tamar. He confessed, "She is more righteous than I." That experience changed his life. Later when the viceroy of Egypt (Joseph not yet recognized by the brothers) threatens to hold Benjamin as a prisoner, Judah offers to spend his life as a slave so that his brother can go free. Judah is the clearest example in Bereishit of someone who takes adversity as a learning experience rather than as a failure. In Dweck's terminology, he had a growth mindset. Evidently, he handed on this trait to his descendents, Caleb among them.

As for Joshua, the text tells us specifically in the story of the spies, that Moses had changed his name. This is sort of strange, because in Exodus, when Moses asks Joshua to fight the Amelekites, he uses the name Joshua. There is some confusion here. Nevertheless, Rashi suggests that the reason why Moses changed his name at that

time and put a Yud, Heh in front of his name, he put the name of God into his name because it was originally Hosea, which means “savior”.

When a person in the Torah changes his name, like Avram to Abraham, or Sarai to Sarah, a name change always implies a change of character. Jacob becomes Israel. When a name changes, says Maimonides, it is as if we are someone else, or saying you are not the same person as you were. Mishneh Torah Laws of Repentance Vol. 2, Sentence 4.

Anyone who has experienced a name change has been induced into a growth mindset. People with a growth mindset do not fear failure. They relish changes. They know that if they fail, they will try again until they succeed. It cannot be coincidence that the two people among the spies who had a growth mindset were also the two who were unafraid of the risks and trials of conquering the land; nor can it be accidental that the ten others, all of whom carried the burden of peoples’ expectation as leaders, princes men of high rank, were reluctant to do so.

If this analysis is correct, 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 that gives us the courage to take risks. That is what Joshua and Caleb knew; one, through his name change, the other through the experience of his ancestor Judah. Hence, the paradoxical but deeply liberating truth – fear of failure causes us to fail. It is the willingness to fail that allows us to succeed.

Shabbat Shalom