

(Dvar Torah continued from the front page...)

“There we saw the giants, the sons of Anak, descended from the giants. In our eyes, we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we were in their eyes.” (Bamidbar 13:33)

They focused on how small they felt, how scary the people of the land were, and how they were certain that they would be defeated. Two of the spies, Caleb and Joshua, tried to focus on the positive but they were outnumbered, and the people of Israel became full of fear and rage. The negativity bias of the ten Spies spread to the people, and they wondered why God had freed them from Egypt just to kill them as they attempted to conquer their land.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks shares a teaching of the Lubavitcher Rebbe on the story of the spies. The Rebbe asked why the spies were so afraid of the people who dwelled in the land when they were already aware that the people of the land feared them:

“Then the chieftains of Edom were startled; [as for] the powerful men of Moab, trembling seized them; all the inhabitants of Canaan melted.

May dread and fright fall upon them; with the arm of Your greatness may they become as still as a stone, until Your people cross over, O Lord, until this nation that You have acquired crosses over.” (Exodus 15:14-16)

As the people of Israel crossed the sea, they chanted these words in the Song of the Sea. If Bnai Yisrael knew they were going to be successful, what were they so afraid of? The Lubavitcher Rebbe answers his question by teaching that *success* was what the spies were afraid of, not failure.

Often it is scarier for us to think about our success than our failure, hence the negativity bias. How often do we hear that voice in our head say, “this will never work out.” Or “what if I totally mess this up even though I worked hard on it?”

The story of the spies makes us think about what it would look like to entertain the possibilities of our own success; to interrupt our anxious thoughts with questions like, “what if things *do* work out?” or “what if all of my hard work *does* pay off this time?” Our very own internal Calebs and Joshuas.

This Shabbat as we read the story of the twelve spies surrounded by a world full of fear and uncertainty, may we be inspired to embrace our own success, whether personally, nationally, or globally. Shabbat shalom!



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Sh'lach

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D'var Torah Entertaining the Possibility of Success

Rabbi Rebecca Weintraub, CY 2017-2018, Rabbi, B'nai Jeshurun, New York City

We, as human beings, are hardwired to focus on things we cannot do or on negative experiences. We tend to shy away from the positive, or even neutral, aspects of our lives. This concept is known in the world of psychology and mindfulness as the negativity bias. The story of the spies, in this week's Torah reading, parashat Shlach, helps us reframe our negative bias and teaches us how to work with it in a more compassionate way.

Our parasha opens with Moshe and the people of Israel sending emissaries to scout out the land of Canaan. Each tribe sends one representative from “the heads of the people of Israel (Bamidbar 13:2).” We can assume the people selected were trusted, well-respected leaders. After the twelve spies explored the land, ten of them returned with a damning report. They began their report with the positive attributes of the land. It did in fact flow with milk and honey and the fruits were large, juicy, and plush. Yet they quickly turned to the negative ending their report with fear and uncertainty:

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D'var Haftarah: On a Religious Mission

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, From the Archives

The rabbinic tradition marvels over the success of the Joshua's spy mission when compared to that of Moses. It sees clues to its success in the way that the story of Joshua's mission is told. The unsung heroes of Joshua's mission are left nameless while the antiheroes of Moses' mission are named in all of their infamy. A late midrash asserts that the heroes of Joshua's mission remain nameless in order to emphasize the fact that they performed their mission selflessly. They acted as "shlihei mitzvah" – those sent on a religious mission and thus God has a particular interest in their success.

The midrash, noted above, quotes a mishnah which shapes the entire discussion of the halakhic (legal) concept of "shaliah mitzvah": "Those who are engaged in a religious (mitzvah) mission are exempt from [the obligations of] sukkah." (Sukkah 2:5) This mishnah prompts an interesting debate among the rabbis in the Talmud (Sukkah 25a; 26a) about the prioritization of the performance of mitzvot. What should a person do when faced with a situation where, while he is involved in the performance of one mitzvah he becomes obligated to perform a second mitzvah? According to this mishnah, a person who is in the process of performing a mitzvah is not obligated to dwell in a sukkah.

Some authorities take this exemption, which is known as "ha'osek bemitzvah patur m'mitzvah – one who is busy with a mitzvah is exempt from another mitzvah" to be operative only where the observance of the second commandment would interfere with the observance of the first. For instance, if a person was traveling in order to rescue captives and sleeping in a sukkah would hamper their mission by making the person lose sleep, this person would be exempt. Otherwise, this person would be obligated (Tosafot).

Others hold that this exemption applies even where the second mitzvah would not interfere with the first mitzvah. This exemption is limited, however, to those who provide others with the ability to perform commandments. These would include those who tie tzitzit or make tefillin for those in immediate need of them. Such a person would even be exempt (in theory) from saying shema or praying, in order that they not be troubled by the performance of other commandments. (See Sukkah 26a; Or Zarua 399; Shulhan Arukh Orach Hayim 38:8). God loves those who perform God's commandments. At times, this, like many other things in life, can be a complicated exercise – one fraught with difficult choices. While neither of these models provide absolute answers to the question of how to prioritize, it is helpful that the sages have given us some helpful principles to guide the way.

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Fake News?

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva, Faculty

Twelve people were sent to scout out the land the Israelites were about to enter (or so they planned). When they returned after 40 days, they reported their findings:

Text: Bamidbar 13:27-29

(27)... We came into the land to which you sent us, and it is indeed flowing with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. (28) However, mighty is the people that dwells in the land, and the towns are fortified and very big, and also the offspring of the giant we saw there. (29) Amalek dwells in the Negev land, and the Hittite and the Amorites live in the mountain region, and the Canaanite dwell by the sea and by the Jordan.

These words created a great unease among the listeners, which eventually led them to cry that they wish not to enter the land. (Be careful what you wish for...)

- What in the delegation's report created the panic (in your opinion)?
- A report can contain facts with or without analysis. How would you define this report? Why?
- Extra challenge: Open up Bamidbar 13:17-20. These are Moshe instructions to the delegation. What kind of report did he ask for?

Commentary: Ramban (Nachmanides) Bamidbar 13:27

And it is indeed flowing with milk and honey – for he [Moshe] instructed them to see if the land is fat or lean, they replied that it is fat and indeed flowing with milk and honey... and with all these they spoke truth and reported about what they were instructed, and they should say that the people living there is strong and the cities fortified for they should give a truthful report to their senders. But their evil is in the word "however", for that will indicate something that a person cannot achieve... that while the land is fat, they will be unable to get there for the people are strong... Additionally they said Amalek is dwelling in the Negev... hinting that there is no direction from which to enter for they [the nations] are all strong: Amalek is in the south and Canaanites in the east and west, and the Emorites on the mountains... They reported as they were sent to do, but turned the people's heart with hints.

- How does Ramban view the truthfulness of the report of the delegation?
- Ramban suggests 2 things that were wrong with the report, what are they? How significant are they in the over-all report?
- Does this report fall into the category of 'fake news'? Why?

We welcome your comments: torahsparks@uscj.org