

A Test of Leadership: Thoughts on Parashat Shelah Lekha, June 5, 2010

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When ten of the spies reported that the Promised Land was inhabited by undefeatable giants and fortified cities, the people of Israel immediately lost heart. Panic swept the community. They cried all night. They complained that they would rather have died in Egypt. They even thought of appointing a new leader to take them back to servitude in Egypt. To them, that seemed preferable to entering Canaan only to be murdered by the powerful Canaanite nations.

The Torah reports the reactions of two sets of leaders to the discontent of the Israelites. "Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before all the assembly of the congregation of the children of Israel." Some commentators understand this to mean that Moses and Aaron bowed themselves in prayer. Yet, the text might better be explained: Moses and Aaron were simply overwhelmed by the peoples' dissatisfaction. They could not find the words with which to address the people; they fell down in despair. The situation had deteriorated so badly--it all seemed hopeless. The response of Moses and Aaron was--falling down on their faces!

The Torah then reports on the reaction of Joshua and Caleb. They tore their clothing in grief, demonstrating their emotional repudiation of the Israelites' state of panic. Then they spoke to the people in strong words: the Promised Land is exceedingly good. God has the power to give us the land. Don't rebel against God. "Do not fear the people of the land, for they are bread for us; their defense is removed from over them, and the Lord is with us; fear them not." The people were ready to stone Joshua and Caleb to death; they did not want to hear these words from them. But Joshua and Caleb had risked standing before the angry mob, endangering their lives by trying to lead the people in a constructive direction.

How does the Torah evaluate the reactions of these two pairs of leaders-- Moses and Aaron on the one hand, and Joshua and Caleb on the other?

Toward the end of his life, Moses recounts the episode of the spies and the rebelliousness of the Israelite nation at that time. God condemned the people to remain in the wilderness for 40 years, until all the men of that generation (aged 20 and above) died out. The faithless complainers would not enter the land--this

event would need to be postponed until a new generation arose. Moses notes: "Also the Lord was angry with me for your sakes, saying, You also shall not go in there [to the Promised Land]" (Devarim 1:37).

Moses himself believed that he was not allowed to enter the Promised Land due to the peoples' panic and faithlessness. This, then, is the key to understanding why God prevented Moses and Aaron from leading the people into their new land. In the face of massive crisis, Moses and Aaron fell on their faces! They no longer had the ability to lead; they could not find the right words or actions to meet the extraordinary challenge of the moment. Because the people had gotten out of control, and because Moses and Aaron did not know how to cope with the discontent--God determined that Moses and Aaron were no longer the right leaders for Israel, and were not the ones who would bring the people into the Promised Land.

Joshua and Caleb, by contrast, tore their garments in mourning and then stood before the angry crowd--offering words of encouragement, faithfulness, and confidence. They risked their lives in the hope of stopping the panic, and redirecting the people to a better vision for the future. In the eyes of God, Joshua and Caleb had proven themselves worthy to become the new leaders of Israel and to bring the coming generation into the Promised Land. While Moses and Aaron were falling on their faces, Joshua and Caleb were standing tall before the nation and offering powerful words of encouragement and faith.

We all face moments of great crisis during the course of a lifetime. These can be crises of a private or public nature. The tendency of many is to become exasperated, to "fall on their faces", to become confused and overwhelmed. Yet, we need to remind ourselves not to collapse under pressure. In times of stress and duress, we need to find the appropriate words and actions that will direct us and others to a better future. If we can keep our idealistic vision clearly in focus, we can overcome temporary setbacks and losses of confidence. If we are to enter the "promised lands" of the future, we will need all the faith, strength and confidence that we can muster.

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