For Shabbat June 21--Shelah Leha

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This week's Torah reading includes the story of the 12 Israelite spies who toured through Canaan in advance of Israel's entering the promised land. The Torah makes it clear that these spies were the top leaders of the 12 tribes. This elite blue ribbon team was supposed to report on what they found on their spying mission.

The spies all saw the same things: the land produced abundant crops; the land was inhabited by powerful people. The majority report of the 10 spies focused on the strength of the enemies--they were giants, we were like grasshoppers in their eyes; the implication was that the people of Israel would be unable to conquer them. Two spies--Caleb and Joshua--assured the Israelites that the land was wonderful and that they would be able to defeat the inhabitants.

The people should have realized that if God had the power to take them out of Egypt--the most powerful kingdom--then certainly He would have the power to bring them to victory against the Canaanite tribes. However, after hearing the negative report of ten of the top leaders of Israel, the people lost heart, mourned and wept, felt themselves abandoned in the wilderness.

What were the internal dynamics that led the ten spies to give a bad report, while two gave a positive report? Why did the Israelites' spirit totally collapse upon hearing the negative report? Why didn't they pay some heed to Joshua and Caleb?

Psychologists speak of a phenomenon known as "informational cascade". If a group of people discusses a problem and tries to come to a resolution, the members of the group are often unduly influenced by those who speak first. If the first two or three speakers espouse a view--even a mistaken view--the next speakers are more likely to doubt themselves, and to go along with those who spoke first. This is especially true if those who spoke first are respected individuals. Many people shy away from confronting or contradicting "leaders", respected individuals. This leads to an "informational cascade" where each subsequent speaker tends to go along with the first speakers, and where dissent becomes increasingly difficult.

One imagines that when the 12 spies compared notes before returning to the Israelite camp, the first few speakers mentioned how powerful the enemies seemed. Once a negative dynamic was established, the others would have chimed in: yes, they are huge; they are mighty; we are nothing compared to them; we'll get wiped out by them; we have no chance. Even when Caleb and Joshua raised their voices in dissent, it was already too late. Panic had set in. The cascade had taken place.

When the spies returned to the Israelite camp, the majority spoke first--and thereby frightened the masses of the nation. The cascade already began before Caleb and Joshua had a chance to speak. Things may have been very different if Caleb and Joshua had given their report first, setting the tone for future discussion and decision-making.

The story of the spies reminds us how wrong even elite panels of experts can be, how leaders can be guilty of misleading their people due to their own internal fears or cowardice. It also teaches us how important it is for each individual to think for himself/herself and not become part of an "informational cascade". One needs the inner strength to challenge and criticize opinions, even those which are espoused by leaders and respected authorities.

The story may also teach us the importance of speaking our opinions promptly and courageously, trying to set a positive tone to future discussion. If we speak encouraging and intelligent words, it is more likely that others who speak later will echo this spirit of optimism and clarity of thought.

Angel for Shabbat