Pessimism, Optimism and Realism--Thoughts on Parashat Shelah Lekha

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Shelah Lekha

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An old joke has it that a pessimist says the glass is half empty; the optimist says the glass is half full; and the realist says--you're using the wrong size glass!

In this week's Torah portion, we read of the twelve spies who were sent to scout the land of Israel. Ten of them were pessimists. They told the Israelites that the land was inhabited by giants. "We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we."

Caleb and Joshua were optimists. They reported that the land was wonderful, and that the enemies would be easily defeated. "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."

While the ten spies were alarmists and defeatists, the two spies presented a rosy picture totally at odds with the report of their colleagues. The masses of people believed the pessimists; they slipped quickly into despair and mourning. As a result, the Israelites were condemned to wander forty years in the wilderness before the next generation would be allowed to enter the Promised Land.

Where were the realists when they were so very much needed? In the Torah's narrative of this episode, we don't hear their voices.

How might this story have turned out happier? When the spies returned from their mission, they should have reported their findings to Moses in a closed meeting. The pessimists and the optimists could have made their cases. Moses could have been the realist who fashioned the report in such a way that it reflected the concerns of the pessimists while also expressing the confidence of

the optimists. The entire group could have presented the people with a balanced report, honest about the dangers ahead but confident that God would bring them victory.

When people face a crisis, they need to be told the truth about the challenges ahead. But they also need to be given a realistic plan of action. It is destructive to create alarm and panic; it is irresponsible to ignore genuine threats.

The story of the twelve spies demonstrates the serious flaws of going public without first having serious private consultations that are grounded in realism. This is true for government officials, for journalists, for opinion makers--for everyone. Responsible leadership entails careful analysis, concern for how one's words and deeds will affect the public, an honest and realistic plan of action that can gain public support and confidence.

In Israel's War of Independence in 1948, David Ben Gurion called a meeting of his military experts to address a serious crisis. Reinforcements were desperately needed in the north, but there seemed to be no way to get the troops there. The experts told Ben Gurion that it was impossible to move troops to the north, since the enemies' positions were too strong. Ben Gurion replied: "We do not need experts to tell us that something is impossible. Anyone can say this. We need experts who can tell us how to accomplish the impossible!" Upon further deliberation, the experts came up with a plan--and they succeeded in doing the "impossible." They found a way of getting the needed troops to the north, and ensuring a victory for Israel in the battles there.

In the many crises which face us--individually as well as communally--it is tempting to give in to pessimism and judge things to be hopeless or impossible. It is also sometimes tempting to ignore the real dangers before us, and to be unrealistically optimistic about chances of success. It is vital, though, that we maintain clear-sighted realism--facing problems honestly, being neither fearful nor foolhardy. If we consider things from different perspectives, we often can gain clarity on how to move forward.

It is the realists who are best suited to achieve the "impossible."

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