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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Shelah Lekha

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Moses appointed a blue ribbon panel representing the top leaders of the tribes of Israel. They were charged with spying the Promised Land and returning with a full report of what the Israelites could expect when they were soon to enter the land.

The twelve members of this panel were the elite of Israel, men of proven leadership.

Yet, this panel came back with a flawed report, representing serious misjudgment. Because of their erroneous evaluation of the situation, the Israelites were condemned to forty years of wandering in the wilderness. An entire generation was lost before the people ultimately were able to enter the Promised Land.

What went wrong? How could this blue ribbon panel have failed? Why did ten of the twelve spies err so terribly? Yes, the spies did report accurately on some of their findings; but they also exaggerated the strength of the enemies and the weakness of Israel. They did not factor in that God—who redeemed them so miraculously from Egypt—would surely be able to lead them victoriously into the Promised Land as He had promised.

The Torah does not report on the inner workings of the committee. But we might speculate based on what we know of human nature. Among these spies, there must have been one or two forceful “control freaks” who set the tone for the final report. There must also have been men of timidity and short-sightedness, who didn’t believe in rocking the boat. The "controllers" set the tone of the discussion and cowed most of the others into submission. If the “big shots” drew certain conclusions, then the weaker members of the committee felt compelled to go along. Joshua and Caleb, who rejected the “majority view” of the committee, were outcasts, marginalized for not maintaining the harmony of the party line. The majority had little patience with those who dissented.

In relating the story of the spies, the Torah is pointing to an important truth: blue ribbon panels can be horribly wrong. Truth is not determined by majority vote. Even top leaders can have serious lapses in judgment that lead to the tremendous detriment of their constituents.

In her powerful book, “The March of Folly,” Barbara Tuchman studied the destructive behavior of leaders from antiquity to the Vietnam War. She notes: “A phenomenon noticeable throughout history regardless of place or period is the pursuit by government of policies contrary to their own interests.” She points out: “Government remains the paramount area of folly because it is there that men seek power over others—only to lose it over themselves.”

But why should people with political power succumb to policies that are wrong-headed and dangerous? Tuchman suggests that the lust for power is one ingredient in this folly. Another ingredient is an unwillingness to admit that one has made a misjudgment. Leaders keep pursuing bad policies and bad wars because they do not want to admit to the public that they’ve been wrong. So more people are hurt, and more generations are lost—all because

the leaders won’t brook dissent, won’t consider other and better options, won’t yield any of their power, won’t admit that they might be wrong. These leaders are able to march into folly because the public at large allows them to get away with it. Until a vocal and fearless opposition arises, the “leaders” trample on the heads of the public. They are more concerned with their own power politics, than for the needs and wellbeing of their constituents.

The Torah presents the story of the twelve spies as a warning to all future generations of humanity. We must remember that the spies succeeded in undermining the morale of the Israelites—because the Israelites themselves allowed this to happen! Why didn’t the public stand up boldly on behalf of Joshua and Caleb? Why were they so easily misguided by their leaders, without demanding clearer answers and better alternatives?

The blue ribbon panel of the elite Israelites led the nation to despair and caused an entire generation to be lost before the nation could enter the Promised Land. Why didn’t the panel members pay more attention to Joshua and Caleb? Why didn’t the nation at large react to the majority report with greater wisdom, with critical minds, with demands for clarifications?

Folly marches on because of the egotism, short-sightedness, and power-grabbing of leaders. It prevails because the public does not rise in defiance of the march of folly.

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