Majorities Are Often Wrong: Thoughts for Parashat Shelah Lekha

View PDF

By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

My late friend and mentor, Professor Mair Jose Benardete, once told me: “You don’t determine truth by counting bonnets!” When seeking truth, one must not be swayed by numbers, by majorities. History has proven time and again that multitudes are often wrong, that lonely dissenting individuals frequently are the great spiritual and cultural heroes of humanity.

In matters of halakha, the Great Court of ancient Israel made rulings based on majority rule. People needed to know the law, and there had to be a definitive decision. But in matters of philosophic or scientific truth, majority votes are irrelevant. Maimonides taught: “When something has been demonstrated, the correctness of the matter is not increased and certainty regarding it is not strengthened by the consensus of all men of knowledge with regard to it. Nor could its correctness be diminished and certainty regarding it be weakened even if all the people on earth disagreed with it” (Guide of the Perplexed, 2:13).

Just as majorities are irrelevant in determining philosophic or scientific truth, so they may be misguided in the area of policy making. Because many people prefer one agenda or one political decision, this does not mean that the choices of the many are objectively the best.

This week’s Torah portion tells of the twelve Israelite leaders who entered Canaan to spy out the land. Famously, ten of these spies came back with a report that indicated the overwhelming power of the inhabitants of the land. They thought the Israelites would be crushed by their enemies. Although Caleb and Joshua tried to reassure the people, the majority report caused panic and loss of heart among the masses of Israelites. This horrible advice of the majority of spies led to the Israelites’ wandering in the wilderness for forty years.

Why indeed did the majority of spies come back with such a negative report? These spies, after all, were the top leaders of the Israelite tribes. This elite group should surely have done a better job. Why were only two of them strong enough to resist the majority’s erroneous report? The Torah may be alluding to the fact

that people—even top leaders—come to incorrect conclusions because their judgment is perverted by their emotions. The spies confronted giants among the Canaanites: “and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight” (Bemidbar 13:33). The spies were infected with fear, with profound feelings of inferiority. Because of their fear and trembling, they were unable to think calmly and reasonably. All factors pointing to the possible success of the Israelites were quashed. They saw giants; they were afraid; their minds could not control their palpitating hearts.

When fear or anxiety govern the decision-making process, majorities will vote with their emotions rather than their minds. People are told: if we follow this path, we will be doomed. Or, people are told: if we don’t make this choice, we will undergo catastrophe. Faced with doom and catastrophe, people’s judgment is impaired. They can’t think beyond their fears. They can’t marshal rational arguments to refute the fear-mongers. They become intimidated. They break down crying, and they make decisions based on desperation and panic.

The Torah is not only teaching that majorities can be wrong, it is also teaching that unique individuals are able to stand up against erring majorities. It often happens that wise individuals see more clearly than the dominant majorities; strong and calm individuals are better guides than fear-mongering or self-serving majorities.

Psalm 147 states that God’s wisdom is infinite (litvunato ein mispar). Literally, the Hebrew words mean: To His wisdom there is no number. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik interpreted this phrase to mean: God is not impressed by numbers! His wisdom is absolute Truth. The Truth is not subject to numerical votes. One person who approaches the Truth is more cherished by the Almighty than millions or billions of people who are remote from the Truth.

Our goals should be to strive for genuine truth and to make the best decisions. We are more apt to achieve these goals if we think calmly and carefully, if we try to factor in all relevant information…and if we do not allow ourselves to be swept up by the fears, anxieties and judgments of others--even if they are the majority. The playwright Diane Grant has aptly remarked: “It’s better to walk alone, than with a crowd going in the wrong direction.”

Angel for Shabbat