

Sources of Courage¹

By: Rabbi Daniel Fridman

*Courage: mental or moral strength to **venture**, persevere, and withstand danger, fear, or difficulty*²

According to the definition above, there is little doubt that Calev and Yehoshua demonstrated courage in *venturing* forth to the land of Israel, and *persevering* in their faith that God would deliver them from the *fearsome* warrior kingdoms of Canaan.

And yet, as we read this week's sedra, we cannot help but wonder as to what, precisely, was the source of that courage. Yehoshua and Calev were not, by any account³, the greatest of the spies, who were all properly described as men of significance, "the leaders of the Jewish people." What, then, differentiated Yehoshua and Calev?

In Yehoshua's case, we may surmise that it was the closeness of his relationship with Moshe that stood him in good stead in the decisive hour. As stated in the Torah, it was Moshe who had originally given young Hoshea bin Nun of the tribe of Ephraim the name Yehoshua⁴, a non-verbal prayer that God would protect, bless, and keep his young protege from all harm⁵. The very fact that the Torah reminds of this name change just before the spies venture forth⁶ may be interpreted as an allusion to the fact that it was the visage of his great mentor, Moshe, that fortified Yehoshua.

II.

Calev's case, however, remains far more elusive. Calev had no special relationship with Moshe, over and above the ten wicked spies. Calev, as a matter of fact, has not appeared in the Torah in any context before this fateful chapter. From where did he draw his strength?

¹ In memory of my Zedi, Dr. Joel Dennis, Yosef Baruch b. Avraham Yitzchak, on the occasion of his sixth yahrzeit last week, whose personal example remains a profound source of strength for his family.

² <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/courage>.

³ See Ramban BeMidbar 13:4, who suggests that there were two spies greater than Calev, and four greater than Yehoshua.

⁴ BeMidbar 13:16.

⁵ See Talmud Bavli, Sotah 34b, as well as Rashi, BeMidbar 13:16, who maintain that the addition of the letter 'yud' was made specially with the incident of the spies in mind. See, however, Seforno and Netiz (ad loc.) whose understanding is that the change in name was made with more than merely the sin of the spies in mind. Netziv, in particular, argues that the name change was made just in advance of Yehoshua's battle with Amalek after the crossing of the Red Sea.

⁶ See Rashbam ad loc. It is striking that the very same verse which tells of Moshe sending forth the spies references Moshe's previous alteration of Yehoahua's name, and contributes to Rashi's perception that the two are linked, if not temporally, at least conceptually.

Before answering this question, it should be noted that while both Yehoshua and Calev eventually publically resist the other ten spies, Calev does so prior to Yehoshua⁷, and is the only one of the spies, including Yehoshua, who is singled out for praise by the Almighty in the aftermath of this catastrophic incident⁸. In plain terms, Calev surpassed Yehoshua in his capacity to challenge the defeatist spies⁹.

Our Sages were keenly aware of this point. Responding to a grammatical inconsistency in the text which seems to indicate that only a single one of the spies went to the ancient city of Hebron¹⁰, our Sages argue that Calev actually went to pray at *ma'arat ha-machpelah*¹¹, at the burial site of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs, to appeal to the Almighty for the fortitude to remain loyal to that very promise which the Almighty had made to those buried there¹².

While one may be tempted to relate to this rabbinic interpretation as homiletical in nature, it is broadly supported in the text of the Chumash itself¹³, as well as in Sefer Yehoshua, in which Calev is awarded the city of Chevron as his portion in the land of Israel in accordance with a Divine promise to grant him that land where he tread¹⁴.

Calev's self-identification as the scion of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov should be understood at two parallel planes. First, the Avot, and in particular Avraham, demonstrated the capacity to stand against the masses, and to maintain views that were deeply unpopular in their time. As Chazal capture this iconoclastic spirit, 'why is he called Avram ha'ivri? For the entire world was on one side [of the river], and he was on the other¹⁵.' To be sure, this willingness to defy the overwhelming majority would stand Calev in very good stead as he sought to avert the temptation of falling in league with the spies.

⁷ BeMidbar 13:30.

⁸ BeMidbar 14:24. The appellation of the term '*avdi*', my servant, to Calev, is highly significant, as it used but a handful of times in all of Tanach to describe a singularly faithful servant of God. Yehoshua himself does not merit such a title until the end of his work, see Sefer Yehoshua 24:29.

⁹ As a matter of fact, when the Almighty first notes that the entire generation would die in the desert, except Calev, there is every reason to believe that Yehoshua will be included in this group. It is only further on in the text that Yehoshua merits survival and entry into the Land of Israel as well.

¹⁰ See BeMidbar 13:22.

¹¹ Talmud Bavli, Sotah, 34b. See Rashi BeMidbar 13:22.

¹² See Chizkuni, *ibid*, who argues that Calev went to Chevron to pray specifically because he did not have the same relationship with Moshe which Yehoshua enjoyed.

¹³ In this connection, it is certainly noteworthy that Rashbam, a textual literalist, gives special accord to this rabbinic interpretation, noting, הגדה נראית פשט שעל כלב דבר הכתוב. In fairness, Rashbam, true to form, does note that the literal meaning of the text supports a view that each of the spies came to Chevron. Nonetheless, the other great literalist, Ibn Ezra, cites only the rabbinic view that Calev alone went to Chevron. See Netziv's Ha-Emek Davar for a fascinating and original interpretation of this verse.

¹⁴ See BeMidbar 14:24 and Yehoshua 14:12-15.

¹⁵ Bereishit Rabbah 42:8.

Second, reaching back towards the Avot themselves is of particular significance as it concerns loyalty to the Land of Israel. Avraham abandoned all that was familiar to him to journey to the Land. Yitzchak, in Chazal's parlance, the *olam temimah*, never left the land. And Ya'akov, while he did leave, only did so under duress, and with great angst, both in the context of fleeing Esav, and when he left for Egypt. And, even if he was consigned to die in that moral wasteland, Yaakov's dying wish, of course, was to be returned to the grave of his father and grandfather, in the Promised Land.

Clearly, in seeking the environment most closely affiliated with the Avot, Calev was not only seeking out a general source of fortitude, but one that was inextricably linked with fidelity to the Land of Israel.

This reading of Calev's motivation in seeking out the Avot may be confirmed by Moshe's refusal, contra his petition in the wake of the Golden Calf, to pray on behalf of the people of the basis of *zechut Avot*, the merits of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov.

As Ramban¹⁶ points out, Moshe could not bring himself to raise the merits of the founding Patriarchs on behalf of those "who rebelled against their fathers" by so brazenly repudiating the Land to which they had cleaved so intensively, "*asher ha-avot bocharim bah me'od*"¹⁷.

III.

What emerges, in summation, from both the examples Yehoshua and Calev, is that the source of courage in times of trial and tribulation is less likely to be an abstract sense of justice, but a deep, visceral, and personal connection to someone whom one relates to as a paragon of courage, be it Moshe, or the Patriarchs and Matriarchs.

This approach is entirely consistent with the rabbinic view¹⁸ that Yosef was able to find the fortitude to resist the advances of Potiphar's wife through this internalization of his father Yaakov's very image, *d'mut d'yokno shel aviv*, and all it represented to him, with respect to integrity and standards.

Of course, the most salient exception to this rule is Avraham himself, who indeed could not point to any mentor, familial or otherwise, in his quest for truth and morality. As Rambam¹⁹ puts it, during the thirty seven years during which Avraham quested for the Creator, from the age of three to forty, he did not have a teacher nor anyone to instruct him in a single matter, *lo hayah lo melamed v'lo*

¹⁶ Ramban to BeMidbar 14:17.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ Talmud Bavli, Sotah, 36b.

¹⁹ Mishneh Torah Hilkhos Avodah Zarah Chapter 1

modia davar. And yet, *echad hayah Avraham*²⁰, our first patriarch was unique, and, in light of his unsurpassed pursuit of truth, we are all privileged to have his example to follow, whilst Avraham could only follow his own conscience.

In our own lives, we are indeed blessed if we are able to point to members of our families or mentors whose virtue enables us to discover previously unknown reservoirs of courage, as both Yehoshua and Yosef did. And, if that is not the case, we may follow the example of Calev, who reached back to the foundation of our people, to those singular individuals through whose courage our very nation was conceived.

²⁰ Bereishit Rabbah 38:6