

Fear of Success

Introduction

In this week’s Torah portion, *Shlach Lecha*, Moses sends 12 spies to scout the land of Israel, at the request of the people. [Deut. 1:22]

-Reason: The people do not take God’s word that the land is good and that they will be successful against its inhabitants.

Ten of the 12 spies bring back an alarming report and say that the enemies cannot be defeated:

The inhabitants are mighty, and the cities are extremely huge and fortified...
We are unable to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we...
The land... consumes its inhabitants, and all the people we saw in it are men of stature... giants... descended from the giants. In our eyes, we seemed like grasshoppers, and so were we in their eyes. [Numbers 13:1-33]

God then gets angry and decrees that the people will wander for forty years in the desert. This will ensure that the offenders will die before reaching the land and that only their children will settle in it.

What did the spies do wrong?

What did the spies do wrong? Didn't they do what spies are supposed to do? I covered this in another d’var Torah and found ten possible answers in the Sources:

- 1-They scared and demoralized the people.
- 2-They doubted God’s power.
- 3-They wondered if God had changed His mind after Israel built the Golden Calf
- 4-They did not report that the inhabitants may have feared Israel.
- 5-They were fearful of facing the inhabitants, being former slaves.
- 6-They wanted go on living in the desert, isolated and directly connected to God.
- 7-They reported using alarmist language.
- 8-They reported to the whole people, not only to the leaders

- 9-They spoke lashon hara against the land and against God.
- 10-They were affected by the Israelites' distrust of God.

Let us now ask the question: Who were the spies? The Torah tells us:

כָּל־אֲנָשִׁים בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל

All [these] men were leaders of the Children of Israel. [Num. 13:3]

So they were not simple people. They were leaders to begin with. So they must have understood, better than the common folk, that God was with them, that God will protect them and allow them to conquer the land. God had already proved his abilities. So why did they discourage the people?

Hassidic sources [Likkutei Torah on Shlach] conclude that the spies' fear was precisely that God *would* keep His promises:

- In the desert, God was taking care of them completely: Manna from heaven, water from Miriam's well, miracles to keep the pursuing Egyptians away from them, teachings...
- In the Promised Land, God would be more distant, even though still keeping watch over them. They would have to do things they were exempted from in the desert: Fight the inhabitants, cultivate the land, earn a living, and build an entire country. *Think.*

In other words, they would have to live in the real world. So they resisted. Like most leaders, they did not welcome change.

The fact that the spies intended to give an alarming report all along was already hinted at in the Talmud:

[The Torah says: "And the spies] went and they came" [Numbers 13:26]. Rabbi Yohanan said in the name of Rabbi Shim'on ben Yohai: This verse likens their going to their coming. Just as their coming back was with wicked counsel, so too, their going to Eretz Yisrael was with wicked counsel. [Sotah 35a]

Living in the real world

The Lubavitcher Rebbe further points out [Likutei Sichot Vol 4 p1041] that it is easy to find God while living isolated and with no responsibilities.

Another Hassidic luminary, Rav Nachman of Breslov, advocated doing just that, every now and then. He preached that to be close to God you have to speak to God "as you would with a best friend" in a natural setting, such as a field or forest, among the natural works of God's creation, to avoid man-

made distractions. And speak to God in your own words, in your mother tongue, for at least one hour every day. He called it *hitbodedut* ("self-seclusion"). It is central to his thinking. He described it as follows:

It is very good to pour out your thoughts before God like a child pleading before his father. God calls us His children, as it is written [in the Torah]:

בְּנִים אַתֶּם לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם

You are the children of the Lord your God. [Deuteronomy 14:1]

Therefore, it is good to express your thoughts and troubles to God like a child complaining and pestering his father.

As one commentator described it:

During a session of *hitbodedut*, the practitioner pours out his heart to God in his own language, describing all his thoughts, feelings, problems and frustrations. Nothing was viewed by Rebbe Nachman as being too mundane for discussion, including business dealings, conflicting desires and everyday interactions. Even the inability to properly articulate what one wishes to say is viewed as a legitimate subject to discuss with God. One should also use the opportunity to examine his behavior and motivations, correcting the flaws and errors of the past while seeking the proper path for the future.

But God wants us to live in the real world.

It is difficult to find God in everyday life, surrounded by busy people who are sometimes animated by unholy motives. That is the challenge.

Fear of success

So the spies were *not* afraid of failure. They were afraid of *success*. It is a common occurrence.

Example:

You are happy with your life.

One day, you are offered a new job: More pay, more perks, more impact.

You know you can do it, so you are not afraid of failure.

But it entails more responsibility, so it will require:

- more of your time (so less time for family, friends and hobbies),
- more work (and you are lazy),
- more scrutiny and media exposure (less privacy),
- more managing and firing and causing pain (it hurts you),
- more interaction with people at new income level (not your type),
- more interaction with people in general (assuming you don't like it),

- more envy and enmity generated by your success, and even
- more risks (e.g., more liability for mistakes, or threats).

It will change your life. All change is painful (fear of the unknown).
It will lower your quality of life.
So you refuse.
The world will have to miss your positive impact. The price is too high.

In 1971, psychologist Abraham Maslow called it “The Jonah complex”:
-In the Bible, God told Jonah to go to Nineveh and tell the Assyrians to repent or he will destroy them. Jonah keeps refusing and escaping, but God steers him back to his mission every time. Finally he reluctantly accepts, warns Nineveh and they repent, so God spares them.

We may *want* to succeed, but *fear* what the new responsibilities entail.