

Spy vs. Spy

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Rabbi Ariel Rackovsky

I have shared with you in the past my enjoyment of the podcast of Rabbi Dr. Dovid Katz, a professor of Jewish History at Johns Hopkins and the Rabbi of Congregation Beth Abraham, also known as “Hertzberg’s,” in Baltimore. In it, he talks extensively about various personalities and topics in Jewish history, but he does not confine himself to that. He also records episodes about Tefillah, the Parshah and the Haftarah, and in this week’s Haftarah episode, he directed the attention of his listeners to a comment by the Abarbanel that answers a question I have had for a *long* time.

To review briefly, Haftarah tells the story of the spies Yehoshua chose to scout out the city of Jericho, to determine the best strategy to conquer it. He chooses two men, and they visit the establishment of the innkeeper Rachav. When the king of Jericho finds out that they are on the prowl, Rachav hides them and supplies them with valuable information, in exchange for which they save her and her family. The question I struggled with was a simple one. Yehoshua was a devoted disciple of Moshe, and he saw what a spectacular failure Moshe’s spy mission became. How

could he repeat the same mistake? This question is amplified when you consider that *Yehoshua was one of the original spies!*

The Abarbanel's answer reflects an astute understanding of statecraft and political science (Rabbi Dr. Katz points out that the Abarbanel himself was a politician, and was a contemporary of Macchiavelli). It was not the enterprise of spying itself that was problematic- it was the execution of the mission that was destined to fail for four fundamental reasons:

Reason #1- Too many cooks in the kitchen

There were way too many spies! Yes, God commanded Moshe to send 12 spies, but that was a concession to Moshe's desire to do so. When there are too many people on any committee or any board, the sheer number of people becomes an impediment to progress. There is an expression whose source is unclear, that says "A camel is a horse designed by a committee." When there are too many people, a group can fall apart due to inability to reach a consensus, or the opposite- for groupthink to set in. Nachbi ben Vafsi of Naftali began to get nervous about the giants, and Gadi ben Soosi of Menhashe followed, and soon Ge'uel ben Machi of Gad, and so on. They presented a unified front when the report was delivered, and it generated mass hysteria from those who listened to it. It was extremely difficult

for Yehoshua and Calev to stand up for their viewpoint when everyone else thought differently.

Reason #2- No One Could Argue With The Spies

In his book *Outliers*¹, Malcolm Gladwell dedicates a chapter to the problem Korean Air faced during a stretch of the 1990s, when it had more crashes than almost any airline. It wasn't aging planes or criminally incompetent pilots that were the culprit; it was that Korean culture is strictly hierarchical, and younger people are expected to be deferential to their elders in every context. There is a saying in Korea that "there is an order for everything, even drinking cold water." Korea is a high power distance culture, in which a strong social hierarchy is preserved. However, the state of the art Boeing planes were designed in the US, which is a low power distance culture in which hierarchies are not as relevant. They are meant to be piloted by a team of equals, which could never exist in a traditional Korean setting. A younger Korean would be culturally prohibited from arguing with his social superior, even if he was convinced that the superior was making dangerous decisions- and that is indeed what happened in the Korean Air flights, as evidenced when the transcripts from the Black Box were released. It is no surprise that data from the 1980s and 1990s showed that airlines of countries with high power distance cultures had the

¹ Chapter Seven, *The Ethnic Theory of Plane Crashes*

highest rates of plane crashes. But Korean Air did the near impossible, and they turned their airline around. It is now a prestigious airline, due in no small part to its stellar safety record. One of the ways they did this was to mandate that all conversations between pilots take place in English, and to require English proficiency from all Korean Air pilots. They recognized that while there is a value to the cultural norms and traditions of their country, communication of equals is critical in the cockpit. It therefore had to be free of the cultural baggage with which the Korean language is freighted.

In choosing the leaders of each tribe as the representatives, Moshe Rabbeinu inadvertently ensured that, in a hierarchical society, no one would argue with the spies. No one would ask probing followup questions, no one would think critically about whether they were reporting facts or adding editorial spin, and no one would question their motives in reporting the situation in the land of Israel as they had.

Reason #3- Poor Job Description

In sending the spies out, the Abarbanel writes that Moshe tasked them with responsibilities that extended beyond the usual realm of spycraft. He should have limited their mission to reporting on the military capabilities of the nations they sought to conquer. Were they in encampments or fortresses? Were they strong or

weak, small or multitudinous? Instead, he asked them to report on the quality of the land and the flora as well, ordering them to provide a travelog aside from their top-secret military mission. The job description became too diffuse, required too wide an array of skill sets and had too many components to ever succeed.

Reason #4- Too many bosses

The final reason the Abarbanel provides for the failure of the mission was that the report was given to the entire Jewish people, rather than just to him. Had he been the address for the report, *he* would have been able to interrogate the spies and seen immediately that they were motivated by fear, interia and projection. Instead, they reported to the entire Jewish people, and, as described above, mass hysteria set in.

Moshe still sent another spy mission, to Ya'azer, where he sent only two people, and it was a success. He recognized that he made serious errors in the way he had planned the first mission, and learned from it for the second time. Yehoshua also learned from Moshe's mistakes. He sent two unidentified spies who reported to him, and him alone, and they had one job to perform.

There are three reasons I find Abarbanel's explanation so compelling. First and foremost, it is basic *pshat*- a logical, straightforward interpretation of the text. Second, in learning from Moshe's mistakes, Yehoshua taught us that no one is infallible, and that it is from the mistakes of the most prominent of people that the most valuable lessons may be extracted. Finally, in Moshe's four mistakes, we find many of the mistakes that plague institutions today, whether religious, academic or both, and whether Jewish or not, when they seek leadership and chart direction. There are often too many people involved in decision making, and too many people to report to and to please (or too many people who *think* they deserve to be reported to). Leaders are provided with nebulous, expansive and ambitious job descriptions that require too many diverse skill sets, and therefore doom them to failure even before they begin. Indeed, in many surveys, this comes up repeatedly as a leading factor in clergy burnout.² Finally, there are hierarchies in place that make progress and success difficult to achieve.

Ally and Simon, we are thrilled that you are here with your families to celebrate your engagement. I think that Abarbanel's explanation of Moshe's mistakes also contains within it some important marriage advice. Moshe's first mistake was putting too many people in positions to offer counsel. As an engaged couple, and then as newlyweds, plenty of people will offer you marriage advice. I was at a

² https://divinity.duke.edu/sites/divinity.duke.edu/files/documents/chi/Adams_formatted_PDF.pdf

wedding, not long ago, where there were sheets of paper available to all the guests to deposit in a jar, on which they could write marriage advice to the new bride and groom. I'm quite certain that most of the advice on those sheets of paper was stupid or trite. Like Yehoshua, you should definitely learn from the *mistakes* of others, much more than from their advice (and yes, I recognize that I am giving you advice right now). Moshe's second mistake was stifling disagreement and exchange of ideas due to power differentials. Learn from this, and make sure neither of you is the dominating force in your relationship- not in terms of needs, attention or personality. Like the cockpit in a successful plane flight, your marriage should involve the communication of equals, without fear of upsetting some social order and without fear of repercussion. Moshe's third mistake was setting the parameters of the mission too wide. I think many people do this in their marriage as well. They harbor unrealistic expectations about the institution of marriage itself, and of the person with whom they chose to enter it. These unrealistic expectations are compounded by their inability to communicate them, so that each partner in the marriage knows what the other person's needs are. In your marriage, make sure your "job description" for one another is clearly defined. This could mean things as mundane as who does the laundry, who is cooking on any particular night and who pays the bills, but also a clear understanding of what kind of emotional load each person is expected to carry. As life changes and as you change, these roles will change too- but you should always communicate what you need, and most

importantly, ask how you can fulfill the needs of the other. Finally, in the same way as it is a bad idea to seek guidance from too many people, Moshe made the mistake of creating too many bosses, too many people to please. A marriage is lived in part in public, but you are playing to an audience of one. Each of you has only the happiness of the other to consider. Even when, please God, you start a family, you two must remain each other's top priority.

Let us all learn from Moshe's mistakes, and from Yehoshua's example, to create healthy, successful marriages, families and institutions.