

A Shabbat Message of Torah from Rabbi Rheins

The Great Debate . . . in this Week's *Parashah*

Leaders representing a cross-section of the nation came together to engage in the great debate. They had just returned after canvassing the land and investigating the best way forward. An enormous crowd gathered to hear their evaluation of the situation and their proposals for the future. One by one they began by praising the greatness of the land. They held aloft the prospect of the bounty that was seemingly within everyone's grasp. They said, "We came to the land you sent us to; it does indeed flow with milk and honey, and this is its fruit" (Numbers 13:27).

But after the positive words of hope, a number of the leaders shouted and shattered the mood. "Efes! It all means nothing because the obstacles are too great!" Their words stunned and frightened the nation.

And when two brave leaders stood up to calm the people, the majority of the other leaders whipped up even greater fear by conjuring nightmares built by exaggerations of imaginary demons and insurmountable obstacles. "We cannot go up; we are not able to rise for challenge. The land we saw devours all who dwell there! And even if we survived the land, we'd still have to deal with giants and monsters" (Numbers 13:31-33).

The people reacted with hysteria. They abandoned hope and began to riot.

This week's Torah portion records the great debate by the early leaders of Israel as they were about to enter the Promised Land. Representatives from each of the tribes scouted the land but only two, Joshua and Caleb, reported that Israel was fully ready and capable of returning to their ancestral homeland. Unfortunately, the strident voices of negativity carried the day and the Israelites retreated back into the desert. And there they stayed for 38 years---until all of that generation had passed and a new generation arose who believed in themselves and their future. Fittingly, it was Joshua who survived long enough to lead them into the Promised Land.

To be clear, those leaders who emphasized that there would be daunting challenges and difficulties were not criticized for their realistic evaluations. Rather, their deep flaw was in resorting in hyperbole and fear mongering. Note also that they employed a rather

sophisticated rhetorical technique: start with a statement of positive good cheer in order to establish that you are, at your core, a reliably optimistic person and then slam the opposition with negativity. As a midrash knowingly relates:

כך דרכן של מספרי לשון הרע פותחין בטובה ומשלימין ברעה.

Such is the way of those who utter slander; they begin by speaking well of one and conclude by speaking ill (Midrash Rabbah Numbers 16:17).

Yes, great debates are a healthy and important part of our society. We need to hear different perspectives and challenges to the status quo. And yes, the debates can sometimes get quite heated. Still, we benefit from the experience. . . as long as the participants remember that the objective of the debate is to help the people make the right decisions. Those who indulge in negative tactics and fear mongering that appeals to our baser instincts are playing dirty only for their own selfish reasons and aspirations. May we be blessed to have leaders who will argue tenaciously but fairly---for all of our sakes.

Shabbat Shalom,

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