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Hope For the Future

In the years prior to World War Two, it was known that two Chassidic sects – the Belzer and the Munkatch Chassidim – did not get along very well. In the town of Munkatch lived a Belzer chassid named Moshe Silber. Fiercely loyal to his Rebbe, he would often argue with the Munkatcher Rebbe. One day, in the midst of such an argument, the Munkatcher Rebbe turned to Moshe Silber and said, "You will die with your *tallit katan* on!" (A *tallit katan* is the small fringed garment that religious men wear under their shirts.)

Some years later, the war came and Moshe Silber was deported to Auschwitz. The threat of death was constant: He suffered hunger, illness and sheer brutality. Of course, in Auschwitz there was no way of obtaining, let alone

wearing, a *tallit katan*. So Moshe Silber never doubted that he would survive Auschwitz. Why? Because, after all, the Munkatcher Rebbe had said he would die with his *tallit katan* on. If the Munkatcher Rebbe – a great *tzaddik* – had said so, it was doubtless to be that way.

Ultimately, Moshe Silber did survive the war. And for years after, he would sit wearing his *tallit katan* in his house in New Jersey, telling visitors wonderful stories about his former opponent, the Munkatcher Rebbe – whose words had given him the strength and hope to survive a living hell.

Time and time again, we see how focusing on the future can get people through times of deep crisis and tragedy. Such an instance is alluded to in this week's Torah portion, Shlach.

Moses, at the behest of the Israelites, sends a group of spies to scout the land of Israel. Ten of the 12 spies bring back a negative report, warning the Israelites of great danger if they enter the land. The Canaanites, they explain, are very strong and the Israelites will be no match for them.

Though the remaining two spies, Caleb and Joshua, argue against this scenario, the people do not believe them and a wave of despair engulfs the Israelite camp. Many speak openly of flouting God's will and returning to Egypt. Angered by this treachery, God informs them that, indeed, they will not enter the land of Israel. Instead they will wander 40 years in the desert, and it is only their children who will inherit the land.

An interesting Midrash points out that this was really not all for the bad. Because it was clear that the Israelites were not ready to enter Israel.

In truth, they needed time in the desert to grow spiritually, and to gain a greater confidence and trust in God.

Nevertheless, with the news of their banishment to the desert, an even greater despair became rampant in the Israelite camp. What guarantee did they have that any Israelites would ever enter the land?!

In an effort to calm the people and assure them that everything would work out, God tells Moses to teach the Jewish People the mitzvah of "Challah." (This is the separation of a portion of dough, which is then given as a gift to the Kohanim.) The key here is that "Challah" is a Mitzvah which initially could only be observed when the Jewish People entered the land of Israel!

It was a great comfort for the people to learn that the Almighty was making plans for the nations' future entry into the land. Though their present circumstances were trying, they were confident they had a future to look forward to. Just like Moshe Silber and the *tallis katan*...



How Do We Rise Above Groupthink?

One of the most startling social experiments ever conducted was the Asch Conformity Experiments. Participants were shown a single straight line, then another three straight lines,

and were asked to identify which of the three matched the length of the original line. It was a simple perceptual task and respondents were expected to get it right almost 100% of the time. And they did - when they took the test on their own. But when a parallel test was set up in which seven actors gave the wrong answer, the success rate of the non-actors plummeted from over 99% to just 63.2%.

The implications are clear. We are influenced heavily and decisively by those around us, and have a tendency to conform to the opinions of others, despite the fact that, without such peer pressure, we would have acted or sided or chosen completely differently. The Asch Conformity Experiments demonstrated conclusively that we are social creatures, and we look for confirmation and affirmation from other people - second-guessing ourselves and often reversing our opinions and even our perceptions. This is called "groupthink".

In this week's Torah portion, we have a classic example of groupthink. The Jewish people are encamped on the borders of Israel and are preparing to enter the land, finally fulfilling G-d's long-standing promise to them and their ancestors. Moses sends a delegation of the nation's best and brightest - the 12 leaders of their respective tribes - to scout out the land of Israel and to report back on their findings. Of the 12 "spies", 10 return with a catastrophically negative report. While acknowledging the beauty of the land and its fertile richness, they describe the inhabitants as formidable enemies who would be impossible to conquer, and propose the entire endeavour be scrapped.

The report of these 10 spies had devastating implications. Hysteria swept the camp, and the people even suggested appointing a new leader and returning to Egypt. In the end, G-d decreed that this generation of the newly liberated slaves would not merit to enter the land of Israel, and would wander in the desert for 40 years before the next generation entered the land.

Remarkably, two of the 12 leaders were able to chart another path. Joshua and Caleb came back with a different story. They encouraged the people to have faith in G-d and to proceed to conquer the land, and entreated them not to follow the assessment of their fellow spies. In doing so, they exhibited great courage, but also presence of mind - the intellectual and moral fortitude to see the situation the way it was, and not succumb to the opinion of the other 10 members of the delegation. Remember, these were the leaders of the Jewish People; people of considerable power and persuasion, of great moral stature and spiritual insight. To swim against this tide, to withstand the immense pressure of groupthink, was no small feat.

Joshua and Caleb went into this task with open eyes; they were aware of the magnitude of the challenge. The Gemara (Sotah 34b) relates how, on the journey through the land of Israel, Caleb stopped at the Cave of Machpeila, in Chevron, where our forefathers and foremothers are buried, and prayed to G-d for the strength to withstand the pressure of the 10 spies. Moses, himself, was concerned, particularly about his young disciple, Joshua, and changed Joshua's name from Hoshea (Salvation) to Yehoshua (G-d will save him), as a prayer for protection from the groupthink.

There is a foundational principle in Judaism that the level of Divine reward always matches the difficulty of the task; the harder the task, the greater the reward, and vice versa. And G-d rewards Joshua and Caleb for their bravery and clarity of vision.

In framing Caleb's reward, G-d commends him for having "another spirit [that] was with him" (Bamidbar 14:24). In his commentary on this verse, Rav Elya Meir Bloch explains this to be referring to Caleb's courage of conviction to have "another spirit" from his 10 fellow spies in withstanding the pressure - the groupthink - of the delegation.

And they weren't alone. Rav Bloch explains how this ability to see things for what they really are, to not be influenced by popular opinion, was one of Abraham's greatest character traits. He brings a fascinating Mishna from *Pirkei Avot*: "There were 10 generations from Noah to Abraham to show how compassionate Hashem is, because all the generations acted contrary to His will until Abraham, our father, came and received the reward of all of them."

The Mishna is describing the ethical and spiritual deterioration that took hold in the world between the generations of Noah and Abraham, as people embraced idolatry and moral relativism, and how - through sheer force of character and courage of conviction - Abraham arrested the slide. He initiated a new era in the world, teaching ethical monotheism to tens of thousands of people and establishing the Jewish people as the guardians of these truths, culminating in the receiving of the Torah at Mount Sinai.

What's puzzling in the Mishna is the assertion

that Abraham "received the reward of all of them". Of course, he merited reward for his own commendable actions, but what right did he have to the reward owed to those who came before him?

Rav Elya Meir explains the forces of history were stacked against Abraham, making his task exponentially more difficult - and thus his achievements exponentially greater and his reward commensurately higher. Like Joshua and Caleb, he faced the weight of groupthink - in his case, 10 generations of established opinion and practice. He entered into a world where paganism and immorality were the norm and had become more deeply entrenched with each passing generation. With each passing generation it became more difficult to be the 'Abraham' - the one who would champion truth and justice and morality in the world. And according to the difficulty of the task - so is the reward. It took 10 generations worth of reward to repay Abraham adequately for withstanding 10 generations of groupthink, and staking out a new path for humanity.

We can draw on the examples of Joshua and Caleb, as well as Abraham, to inspire us to withstand the pressures of groupthink in our own lives. But, how do we do it?

One way is to proactively create a positive moral environment for ourselves and our families by associating with good people. But there is also another way. I believe there's an approach in our parsha - one that is really empowering. I mentioned earlier that Moses changed Joshua's name from Hoshea to Yehoshua. The Sforno points out Yehoshua has a double meaning - it means "he will be saved", but also that "he will *save others*".

And this is the secret to turning the power of groupthink and social influence on its head. Instead of being influenced and swayed by others, we can *do* the influencing. We can proactively use its power to change the world around us for the better. Instead of being led, we can lead. Joshua himself went on to lead the Jewish people, to inspire them with Torah values and faith in G-d. He was strong and courageous, and inspired that strength and courage in others - and it was under his leadership that the Jewish People finally entered the land of Israel.

The power of social influence presents an enormous challenge, but it also presents an enormous opportunity - the opportunity to make the world a better place.

To be a leader is to positively influence the people around us; to teach and to illuminate and to make the world a better place. We can all be leaders through our daily interactions with others, through our Torah values and ideals, through the way we live our lives.



When Perception Becomes Reality

How does one assess oneself? Do we look at ourselves in the mirror or try project an appraisal through the eyes of another? The

answer to this question may be found in *parashat Shelach's* episode of the scouts.

The scouts were 'all distinguished men; heads of the children of Israel were they' (*Num.* 13:3) – the most honourable of leaders – and thus the obvious question is where did they go wrong in speaking badly about the land? Perhaps their error was that they speculated as to how others observed them rather than carrying on with their reconnaissance mission. This is apparent in a strange verse when the scouts describe the great size of the Canaanites and say, 'we were like grasshoppers in our eyes, and so we were in their eyes!' (13:33) Their insecurity lay in and was revealed through their imagined self-assessment via the eyes of the Canaanites. Since they saw themselves as but puny insects, much smaller and weaker than the inhabitants of Canaan, they presumed that the locals perceived them as such, and they allowed this perception to transform their reality. Perhaps this was the source of their negative review of the land as their specific timidity clouded their general judgement.

When beginning any venture, the psyche in which one approaches the task, can frame its execution. When one is competing in a sport for example, a team will have lost the game from the outset if it does not believe it can beat the opposition, because its self-esteem defines its attitude and direction. The same was true of the scouts whereby they had convinced themselves that they were incapable from the beginning. Many explain this fear as a lack of faith in God but as a corollary or at its source, it may have showed a lack of self-esteem, that is a lack of faith in themselves. From this vantage point the scouts doubt themselves with regard to the people, 'we cannot ascend to that people for it is

too strong for us!' (13:31) and mistake God's promised 'land of milk and honey' (13:27) for 'a land that devours its inhabitants' (13:32). Thus, the Torah's peculiar wording is simply a cause and effect, that is, it was because they saw themselves as worthless, ('we were like grasshoppers in our eyes') that they became worthless in their eyes ('and so we were in theirs').

Later in the Book of Numbers Moshe declares, 'you shall appear clean before Hashem and the Israelites' (32:22). The Talmud learns from this that one should not only have a clear conscience but also act in a way that does not elicit suspicion from the general observer (*Yoma* 38a). However, if one only worries about the way in which one presumes others perceive one, whether from a positive or negative level of self-esteem, one is being dishonest. As a generation whose parents and grandparents only knew slavery and were constantly assessed by their slave masters, psychologically it makes sense that they were unfit to enter into the Land of Israel as is evident by their psyche. This generation therefore had to die out entirely before their descendants could become the masters of their own destiny. When one tries to guess what others think of him and acts based on that, they become slaves to an unfortunate fate, but when one allows themselves to master their own course, they are able to forge their own destiny.



The See-Food Diet

I remember many years ago, as a little boy, watching our dog, Krishna, as he wolfed down his Pedigree Chum dog food. I was impressed by how excited he was, to the extent that he basically sucked it from the can and into his stomach without it seemingly touching the inside of his mouth.

As a young boy, there could only be one conclusion: It was the most wonderfully delicious food in existence. And of course, I had to try it. And so I did. It was not the most disgusting meal of my life - I think that octopus was worse, back in my pre-kosher days - but I did throw up afterwards and it was not a particularly pleasant experience.

In this week's portion, we are commanded not to "follow our eyes." The eyes see and the heart desires, the Sages tell us. What's missing in the middle of all that? The mind, of course. It's so easy for our eyes to see something and our heart to desire it and for us then to make a decision without even thinking about it.

My eyes see Pedigree Chum. My heart desires it. I forget to consult my mind, which would of course remind me that our dog also enjoyed eating rats in the back garden - and that perhaps our taste buds were programmed differently. But no, my eyes saw, my heart desired, and next thing I knew, it was horsemeat for dinner.

This is an extreme example. But our lives are rife with this stuff. The eyes see cheesecake. The heart desires it. Into the mouth it goes - forgetting the fact the body is on a diet because the mind was never consulted. The eyes see something new to buy. The heart desires it. Out comes the credit card, ignoring the fact that there is no money in the bank. The eyes see a beautiful woman. The heart desires her. Out of the window go responsibility, commitment, marriage and a whole lot more.

Don't follow your eyes, the Torah tells us. Follow your mind instead. Your eyes might lead to immediate gratification. But your mind is an infinitely better judge of what will ultimately make you happy.

