

The Many Have Spoken

This Shabbat we read the famous portion, Shelach. In this week's parsha, Moshe sends out 12 spies to explore the land of Israel and to bring reports back to Moshe about the strength of the fortifications of the land's inhabitants and the quality yield of the land's produce. This, of course, goes fabulously wrong. Ten of the spies return with highly critical, negative reports. Two spies, Joshua and Caleb, try – in vain – to rally support for the settlement of the ancestral land.

This section of the spies' slander comes directly after the episode of Miriam's slander of her brother Moshe, to their brother Aaron. The rabbis saw these two events as thematically linked. Miriam's slander was an event that paralleled the slander of spies about the land. And the deeper problem is the failure to introspect and heed the lessons from our leaders. Miriam was a communal icon; she was ostracized and publicly shamed. The entire nation was forced into a standstill for a week, waiting for Miriam to emerge from her punishment. And yet, the spies fall in the very same manner where Miriam fell.

However, the similarities are not identical. Miriam speaks about one person to another person. Many commentaries believe that Moshe was even within earshot of Miriam's attack, but he was too humble to issue a reply. The spies were a collective. The Talmud uses their group as an archetypal communal structure. The number ten, the number of spies bearing ill reports, are the same number used to establish a quorum; without ten adults, communal prayer is severely truncated. The spies were not alone; they spoke as a communal, plural voice. And they spoke about an inanimate entity. It is a terrible thing to malign a person – to minimize a soul; to alter others' perception of a person. But land feels no hurt. To quote the song: 'a rock feels no pain; an island never cries.'

Rather than looking at the two stories side by side as a highlight of the ethical failings of a community that wears blinders over its eyes, this may, instead, amplify the extent of the sin of slander. Slander is naturally thought of as destructive talk about another person. But that is only one expression of slander. Another type of slander is national/institutional slander. This form of slander is dangerous in its own right.

As the Torah reading continues after the Spies deliver their negative message, the people cry and scream and want to return to Egypt. The community disbelieves in the potential of the land to provide for them a home. And they are punished to stay in the land for forty years. Here, too, like Miriam, forced to stay outside the camp for her transgression, the generation of exiles are forced to stay outside the land for theirs.

And today we see the destructive results of the collective voice, issuing public condemnation on a nation-state. Every day, practically, there is new call to divest from Israel in response to a grave injustice or inhumanity or unethical policy. This week, the US Supreme Court engaged the communal conversation about the Jewish homeland, ruling that a US citizen born in Jerusalem cannot list Israel as his country of origin, which would define Jerusalem as part of Israel. However, international law defines Jerusalem as a neutral, owned by no single state.

Were we to be swayed by the communal conversation, we would might – in fact – re-considered our relationship to Jerusalem. However, this is where our parsha informs the present – the people in the desert were swayed by the spies; they were moved by the words of the few. Had the community followed the faith of Joshua and Caleb, they would have left the desert and settled the land in the second year of their exodus from Egypt. When we hear the attacks and the policy positions and the negatives about the land, we must be vigilant not to allow it to divert our faith and hopes. Jerusalem is the capital of the land of the Israel and the Jewish people, irrespective of the thoughts of six justices of the Supreme Court. Israel is the land of the Jewish people and the home of our dreams, irrespective of the antagonism of its neighbors or the calls to boycott, divest and sanction.

Shabbat Shalom Umevorach
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