

The Value of Ego **Rabbi Zev-Hayyim Feyer**

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Parshat Sh'lach L'cha

Send out men to spy out the land of Canaan. . . . Of every paternal tribe shalt thou send a man, each one a chieftain. (Numbers 13:2)

Thus does this week's Torah portion begin. And we learn that ten of the twelve spies brought back an unfavorable report, and the people were so discouraged that they wanted to return to Mitzrayim (Egypt).

The Haftarah, the Prophetic reading, that accompanies this Torah portion tells (Joshua 2:1-24) of Joshua's sending two spies on a similar mission, but they brought back a favorable report, and we cannot but ask about the difference.

Why did Moses' mission fail while Joshua's mission succeeded? After all, Joshua was Moses' disciple; we would expect the master's mission to be more successful than that of the disciple.

We find an answer in the way the text describes the two events.

- ✧ Moses was instructed by G*d "*sh'lach l'cha*; send for (or to) thyself;" Joshua simply sent.
- ✧ Moses sent men who were identified with each of the tribes; Joshua sent men without explicit tribal identification.
- ✧ Moses' spies were leaders, of high rank; Joshua's spies were unremarkable, unprepossessing.
- ✧ Moses' spies bore individual names; Joshua's spies were anonymous.
- ✧ Moses' spies explored the land openly; Joshua's spies explored in secret.

These five differences are connected; they stem from the difference between Moses and Joshua.

Moses was instructed by G*d "*sh'lach l'cha*; send for thyself." G*d directs Moses to send spies who, like Moses, epitomized humility and service to the entire nation. G*d then continues by saying **Of every paternal tribe shalt thou send a man, each one a**

chieftain. Traditionally, we have understood this to be further instruction; G*d desires Moses to send tribal chieftains as spies. But the text does not contain explicit tone of voice, and we can as easily read this as G*d's sighing in resignation. G*d tells Moses to send out spies characterized by humility (as Moses is characterized by humility, reading *l'cha* not as "for thyself," but – admittedly, a slight stretch – "like thyself"). Then G*d, aware that Moses' great level of humility will lead him to name individuals who seek honor, sighs in resignation at the prospect. And we can read G*d's statement to Moses as **I wish thee to send out men like thyself to spy out the Land of Canaan. . . . But thou wilt send one individual from each tribe, high-ranking men of honor.** Moses' humility led him to choose high-ranking men.

And their pride, in turn, led them to explore the land openly. What happens when would-be spies gather their information openly? Those on whom they are spying can choose the information that the spies are given. Moses' spies brought back the information the Canaanites wanted them to have; Joshua's spies – in their anonymity exploring secretly – gleaned the information which they needed.

Joshua lacked Moses' humility; he enjoyed his leadership position. To protect his leadership position, he selected spies who (a) were not identified with any particular tribe and therefore had loyalty to him, not to their tribes, and (b) were nameless and therefore unthreatening to his position as leader.

If Moses could have exercised his ego, the spies he sent might all have brought back a favorable report, and the despair of the people (of which we read in response to the spies' negative report) might have been avoided. If Joshua had been as self-effacing as Moses, his spies might have been as proud as those whom Moses sent, and their report as negative.

Humility is a most valuable spiritual quality, a great spiritual attainment. But true humility is not self-effacing; it includes an awareness of one's abilities and responsibilities. It includes an awareness of when the ego must express itself. Moses' deep humility led him – unknowingly – to choose spies who would bring back the wrong report; Joshua's ego led him to choose "better" spies.

To a humility that recognizes when to use ego (and when not to do so), may we speedily be led.

Shabbat Shalom.