

Fear is a Disease; Courage is its Cure

By HaRav Ariel Bar Tzadok

Copyright © 2000,2010 by Ariel Bar Tzadok. All rights reserved.

The episode of the twelve spies recorded in the Biblical Book of Number and the horrible effect it had on all Israel is not recorded in the Torah merely to inform us about an event in ancient history. The story of the twelve spies bears witness to us as a warning throughout the generations. **We are warned that there will be a heavy price to pay for one of the greatest sins in the Eyes of G-d - the sin of cowardliness.**

From reading the Biblical narrative, a conclusion that we must unfortunately make is that even after witnessing earth shattering, monumental miracles of the most stunning nature, miracles by themselves are not convincing enough to change what is in the hearts and minds of people. G-d brought the children of Israel out of Egypt with a Mighty Hand and with overt miracles. He brought them to Sinai, where everyone there heard the Voice of G-d. Yet, soon afterward, there were still some “bad apples” among the crowd who brought down ruin and havoc upon everybody. Woe to us that nothing has changed in all these years!

The story of the spies reveals to us how we can sometimes act as our own worst enemy. Pay attention to the details of the story. The standard Biblical commentator Rashi makes it clear that the decision to send spies to check out the Land was not G-d’s command. Indeed, it wasn’t even Moshe Rabbeynu’s idea. It was the idea of the people. Now granted, not all the people wanted to send spies. Some must have trusted in G-d. Some must have shared the spirit expressed by Yehoshua and Kalev. Yet, their voices are never heard. **The lesson to be learned from this is a frightening one - fear is a contagious disease!**

The fear that was in the hearts of ten cowardly men spread through the entire Israelite population, silencing even those who would have felt or spoken otherwise. Although many might have shared the faith of Yehoshua and Kalev, nonetheless, they were all punished as if they did not. Hear we see clear evidence about the reality of collective guilt and punishment. **A nation operates psychologically as if it were a single individual. In such a state, for better or for worse, the nation as a whole suffers the fate of the psychological disposition of the majority of its members. Essentially, it is our own individual psychological imbalances that when left unchecked and thus spread to infect the entire populace cause national calamities.**

Why, you might ask, if many others shared the faith of Yehoshua and Kalev were they not protected and spared, as were those two? The answer seems obvious. Yehoshua and Kalev were the only two to speak out against the masses. They were the only two willing to stand against the crowd and against public opinion. They were the only two willing to endanger their lives to stand up publicly for what they knew was right. They would not go with the flow and allow the growing national psychosis of the moment to infect and blind them.

As for the others who might have shared with Yehoshua and Kalev their faith in G-d, they did not, however, share their actions. It was due to their lack of action that the other men of faith were punished. **Sharing convictions is a nice thing to do. Yet, unless one shares in action and does the right thing, not just talk about it, one shares the fate of those who do nothing.** They suffer the same penalty of those who lack faith. For faith without action is not enough! Actions are the things that count in the eyes of Heaven. No action, no benefit, in spite of what one feels or believes in one's heart.

Being that action is so important, why then when the children of Israel wanted to rectify their fear by then challenging the Caananites and Amalakites were they not reinforced and supported by G-d? We might think that if at first you get it wrong, then do it again and get it right. While we might think this concept to be correct, G-d does not. Unlike us, G-d knows the hearts of man. G-d saw that the fear that motivated the people to recoil from taking the Land was now manifesting as rebellion against His word. **Acting out of fear and pretending it is courage is still acting out of fear. In the end such actions are doomed to failure. Fear destroys the resolve for proper action. Unconscious or denied fear subverts proper action and sabotages it.**

G-d had already prescribed a remedy for Israel's collective illness of fear. That dreaded cancer was to be removed from the collective consciousness of the nation with the death of the adults who bore the fear in their hearts. It is of no use now to attempt an attack on the Caananite/Amalakite enemy. For **the true enemy is an internal one, a psychological one.** The external enemy is peripheral and would be defeated at the appropriate time. It is the internal enemy of psychological imbalance, the existence of fear and lack of faith that must first be battled. Only upon a victory here can external battles be fought and won!

Fear is like a cancer, it is a serious threat to one's spiritual, mental, emotional and physical well being.

The children of Israel were so terrified by the report of the spies that they wanted to appoint a new leader and return to Egypt. These people had not forgotten how bitter their lives were in Egypt. They could imagine how the Egyptians would treat them if they returned. Nonetheless, the terror of moving forward in faith so paralyzed them that they were willing to return to the harshest type of existence, as slaves, rather than to fight for freedom by rising up to conquer Eretz Yisrael.

G-d could only respond in the most necessary and appropriate manner. When He saw that the resolve and morale of the people had been broken, G-d decided that it would be easier to tear down and start all over again. Were it not for Moshe Rabbeynu, there would be no children of Yisrael today, only the children of Moshe. G-d wanted to wipe out the cancer of fear by destroying the entire Israelite nation, (except Moshe). Moshe Rabbeynu pleaded with G-d for mercy and we were spared.

Yet, in spite of the national repentance at that time, the spirit of fear still clung to the people's hearts. Indeed, it never left, nor could it leave. G-d thus had to let die that entire generation in the wilderness. This is why the children of Yisrael lived in the wilderness for 40 years. The slaves had too much fear in their hearts; they could not understand, nor grasp, true freedom.

While, it is not my normal practice to quote from secular or non Jewish material, the following words about fear truly express its dangers and offers a way how to fight it. This is a quote from a science fiction novel, the details of which are unimportant. I interpret this message to be

consistent with Torah, therefore, in the spirit of Ben Zoma (Pirkei Avot 4:1) who said, “who is wise? He who learns from every man” I offer you these words.

“I must not fear. Fear is the mind killer. Fear is the little death that brings total obliteration. I will face my fear. I will permit it to pass over me and through me. And when it has gone past I will turn my inner eye to see its path. Where the fear has gone there will be nothing. Only I will remain.”

Dune, Frank Herbert (New York: Berkley Pub., 1987, c1965)

To these words, I add my commentary; the “I” spoken of at the end is the same “I” who spoke at Mount Sinai saying, “I am HaShem your G-d.” Thus when we allow fear to dissipate, trusting in G-d, we will find that fear will fade away like a morning mist. When this done, all that will be left will be the Presence of G-d. It is this Presence, the indwelling Shekhina that arouses a man and turns him into a champion and a hero (Gibor HeHayil). Such was the case, recorded in Shoftim (Judges) 6-8, of Gidon Ben Yoash.

Gidon is chosen by G-d to redeem the Israelite people from the oppression of Midian. After being given a sign by G-d that he will indeed succeed, he gathered for himself an army of over 30,000 troops. Yet, G-d tells him that the army is too big. G-d does not want Israel to believe that they have won this battle by means of arms. G-d wants Israel to know that it is He who is saving them by His miraculous power. Following G-d’s command, Gidon’s army is weeded down to a measly 300 men. On the other hand, the enemy troops, which include Midian, Amalek and the people of the East are described as being “numerous as a locust swarm, countless as the sand at the seashore” (Judges 7:12).

G-d commands Gidon to go into battle, yet tells him, that if he is afraid, then he should sneak up onto the enemy camp and listen to what it is they are saying. Gidon does just this. He sneaks up close to the camp of the enemy and overheard two guards talking. One guard said to the other that he had a dream. The second guard interpreting the dream says that the Israelite army is ready to attack them and that they will all be defeated. **This is a sound psychological principle - once the thought of defeat has entered one’s psyche, however unconscious it is, the physical manifestation of defeat will soon manifest.** This is true of the enemy and it is also true of ourselves.

Gidon understood the power of dreams as being manifestations of the unconscious. Once he heard the guard say he dreamed of defeat, this meant that defeat was in his soul. Moreover, **if defeat was in the soul of one soldier, like a contagious disease, the spirit of defeat had spread to them all.** All Gidon had to do now was to attack. Although he was heavily outnumbered, the fear that was in the enemy’s heart proved their undoing. Gidon was able to completely and successfully rout his enemy.

Gidon was a brave man who fought a frightened enemy. Regardless of their overwhelming number, the fear in their hearts wrecked more havoc on themselves, than soldiers a hundred times their number. This is a lesson of the greatest significance and must be learned well and understood fully by modern forces today.

Let us learn to overcome mortal fear - and to ACT WITH COURAGE. Courage, when coupled with wisdom becomes an almost unstoppable weapon. Our collective enemies have learned this lesson well and use it against us. We must use it in turn to defend ourselves and everything that we hold dear. We do not have much time. **Fight with fear; one loses. Fight with courage; one wins. It really is this simple.**