

Drash for Parasha Shelach  
June 20, 2020  
By Lisa Josephs

In this week's parasha, God instructs Moses to select scouts to go out and assess the land of Canaan. Certain things stand out to me about the scouts, their report, and what the Israelites hear from the scouts.

The scouts are chieftains in their tribes, not average men, but leaders. We don't have much detail about them, but it wouldn't be a stretch to think that they have both authority in their tribes, as well as the trust required for people to obey them.

Their report, despite Moses' detailed questions about the land, actually spends very little time talking about geography and agricultural details. It is almost entirely about the people, after a short comment on the land itself. This is despite needing two men and a carrying frame to bring back one bunch of grapes. That made less of an impression on them than the people they saw.

And what the Israelites heard about the land is clear from verse 32—the scouts spread “slander” or “calumnies” (as in my translation) about the land.<sup>1</sup> In the next verse, we get the famous phrase “and we looked like grasshoppers to ourselves, and so we must have looked to them.”<sup>2</sup>

As always, the question in front of us is how to find relevance in a story that is thousands of years old.

What do you think would happen if, instead, it was 12 city mayors getting together to see a proposal for a new waste management facility. Each of them knows how much this project could help their town, save money, and solve problems. But, say as in the parasha, one mayor speaks out against it—raising concerns about the waste processing and bringing up issues of down-stream effects of the plant run-off.

If 10 elected officials are supporting the project and one isn't, I think you'd end up with 12 cities with most of the residents either neutral or in favor of the project. (I realize waste management isn't the most riveting of issues). Why wouldn't the city that elected the dissenting mayor go with their assessment? I think possibly because if 10 surrounding communities, leaders, and regional news are all showing support for the project, they'd be swayed by the majority view.

Each of the chieftains who scout the land is in a position of trust and expertise, relative to the average person in their tribe. They are vested with authority and the right to make decisions on behalf of the others. And, like everyone, each sees the situation through the lens of their own life, experiences, and needs. So, as they spread their stories among their tribes, the people trust the voices of their leaders, while Caleb's tribe looks around and says “how can all of THEM be wrong?”

So what is really happening?

---

<sup>1</sup> “And they spread an evil report of the land which they had spied out unto the children of Israel, saying: 'The land, through which we have passed to spy it out, is a land that eateth up the inhabitants thereof; and all the people that we saw in it are men of great stature.’” Numbers/Bamidbar 13:32

<sup>2</sup> “And there we saw the Nephilim, the sons of Anak, who come of the Nephilim; and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight.’” Numbers/Bamidbar 13:33

This is a scene of profound errors in thought, leading to poor decisions. The scouts assume that the Canaanites see them as they see themselves—small and weak. They’ve discounted a huge reason in favor of conquering the land, despite carrying it on their backs for several days.

For their part, the Israelites who hear the stories aren’t actually afraid of the Canaanites, the giant-men that the scouts describe. They are afraid of a story, with no firsthand knowledge to back it up. They’ve latched onto the first explanation they’ve heard and aren’t considering other evidence or perspectives. Caleb is offering them a differing view, but he is one man while the majority disagrees.

We have a pattern of a bad decision coming out of assumptions, misattribution, fear, and not considering all the evidence. Altogether, we call these patterns “cognitive biases.” The biases we see on display in this story are generally verified by research.

Humans **do** have a tendency to believe what other people believe (called groupthink, bandwagon effect, or herd behavior). Humans **are** prone to focusing on information that supports one’s preconceived notions (called a confirmation bias). And, as the Israelites demonstrate so well, humans are prone to remembering the past more favorably and regarding the future more negatively. Egypt was never so good as when they finally left it.<sup>3 4</sup>

To be clear—having biases is not a moral failure. Although the jury is still out on whether cognitive biases serve some sort of evolutionary purpose, they are a fact of being human. For all that the brain is a miracle, it is still flawed. Our brains are limited by many factors, few of which we have direct control over—age, trauma, how well you sleep, the last time you ate, distractions, and so many other issues all play a role in how well your brain works. Think about that feeling around 4 pm on Yom Kippur when you’ve just realized you’ve zoned out for the past 10 minutes.

If a similar situation were happening today, I think we would have a different problem than the Israelites. While they had severely limited information, we would have too much information and details would conflict with one another. There’d be at least half a dozen conspiracy theories attributing the huge cluster of grapes to 5G towers. But, the problems still play out in the same way—even with all the information in the world at our fingertips, cognitive biases make it difficult to accurately assess information.

I have wanted to talk about cognitive biases and Torah for months now. The reason is because while having biases is no moral failure, they are still stumbling blocks that can lead to moral issues. They’re the stumbling blocks we place in front of ourselves.

One of the common biases is that I’m more likely to attribute my mistakes to situational issues and the mistakes of others to who they are as a person. I cut someone off in traffic because there was a bee in the car; they cut me off because they’re a jerk. If I’m just shouting at someone from the safety of my own car, there’s little impact. But these also come to play in all parts of life, including when I decide which causes to support or when I stand in the voting booth—who do I think is worthy of office? What

---

<sup>3</sup> “What is Cognitive Bias” (<https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-a-cognitive-bias-2794963>)

<sup>4</sup> “12 Common Biases that Affect How We Make Everyday Decisions”

(<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/thoughts-thinking/201809/12-common-biases-affect-how-we-make-everyday-decisions>)

policies do I support? My assessment of the world, whether it is right or wrong, will have an effect on other people.

Whether or not there were Israelites who wanted to hear more of what Caleb had to say or were thinking that the risk might be worth it if it meant getting to a place that produces mega-clusters of grapes, the decision of the group had consequences for everyone. Of course, these mistakes are easy to see in hindsight and with thousands of years of commentary and interpretation. It is tempting to say “Well, I’m smarter than that, I’m better informed. I’d be faithful to God.” But, that itself is a cognitive bias—the tendency to see oneself as less biased is called the bias blind spot.

What does that leave us with? We’re obviously not going to rewire the human brain any time soon to clear up biases. I’m also a bit skeptical of a technological solution in the near future. But, after the sullen Israelites say “okay fine, we’ll fight,” the direction of the text changes. We get a discussion of the sacrifices that will be performed in the Land, once they inhabit it. These are sacrifices about peace and the fulfillment of vows. There is also a set of instructions on how to deal with inadvertent sin and mistakes.

The consequences are carried out—the people who fought without God’s favor don’t make it back and the people over the age of 20 who remain do not get to enter the Promised Land. But this coda of sacrifices about how to get along and recover from mistakes seems to be the way forward. Sincere admission of a mistake, sacrificing a point of view, and some humility when it comes to assessing our abilities could be the foundation of moving forward, of building a future.

Shabbat Shalom.