

Optimism in the Face of Real Obstacles

Sermon on Jewish Leadership in honor of Leah Elenzweig

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Wandering in the desert for forty years was not God's original plan for the Children of Israel. I've actually traveled from Cairo to Jerusalem, over land, in a day. Admittedly, I was able to avail myself of technology -- in my case, a bus -- that wasn't available to Moses. Still, even on foot, and with the forty-day detour at Mount Sinai, the journey shouldn't have taken more than several months.

And so we find ourselves, at the outset of this week's portion, with the Israelites ready to conquer the Promised Land. Yes, God will provide the military might. Still, God seeks the people's partnership. God and Moses plan to deputize twelve spies, one from each tribe, to scout out the Land. The spies are given two charges: First, they are to report about the Land itself: Is it good and fertile, flowing with milk and honey as promised? Then, the spies are to assess how the Israelites should go about conquering the Land of God's promise. That's where the partnership comes in: The people are to strategize based on facts they find on the ground; God, as always, will assure victory.

The spies come back with a mixed report. Oh, they all agree that the Land is magnificent. They bring back a cluster of grapes so huge that it must be suspended on a pole carried by two men.

On the other hand, ten of the spies report that the Land cannot possibly be conquered. They claim that Canaan is populated by giants. The cities, they say, are so well fortified that the walls reach up to the heavens.

The Israelites, hearing the report of their leaders, dispatched as spies, are disheartened. They sulk in their tents. They refuse to enter the Land promised to them. They lose their nerve -- and, more to the point -- their faith. They no longer believe that God will assure their safe passage into the Land of Israel.

God reacts swiftly and angrily to the people's crisis of faith. God announces a new plan: The Children of Israel will wander forty years. Those who fail to trust God, an entire generation, will die in the wilderness. Only their children will enter the Land of Israel, redeeming the ancient promise.

Two men, though, are exceptions. You will recall that only ten of the spies had told of unconquerable giants and unassailable city walls. The remaining two spies, Caleb and Joshua, attempt in vain to calm the people, to assure them that they can enter the Promised Land after all, with God's help.

Caleb and Joshua are not successful. They do not achieve their desired outcome: The Israelites remain hunkered down in their tents, petrified of moving forward into the Land. God doesn't intervene to help Joshua and Caleb persuade the Israelites. Nevertheless, Caleb and Joshua are rewarded. Unlike their entire generation, they will survive forty years of desert wandering and enter the Land of Israel with the next generation.

Some rabbinical commentators argue that Joshua and Caleb are blessed because they tell the truth about the Land, while the other spies lie. A closer reading of the Torah itself, though, suggests a different scenario. Neither Caleb nor Joshua ever denies the presence of gigantic enemies in the Land. Neither do they insist that the cities' fortifications can easily be breached or scaled. Instead, Joshua and Caleb insist that, whatever the challenges that lie ahead, they can be met successfully, with God's help. God, who has redeemed Israel from slavery with ten plagues and a parting of the Sea can surely also overcome the people of the Land and their city walls, no matter how tall.

This week's Torah portion demands that we all seek to be disciples of Joshua and Caleb: that we all live with faith and trust, whatever the obstacles before us. My Mussar teacher, Alan Morinis, has taught me that *bitachon*, real trust, doesn't require us to believe that everything will always go perfectly. Instead, with *bitachon*, true faith, we can be optimistic that we will be O.K., whatever the outcome.

God forbid, we may be faced with a devastating diagnosis. While psychologists will tell us that denial and bargaining are normal, appropriate stages in such a situation, neither is the best or most effective response. Only if we respond like Caleb, acknowledging the full weight of the deck stacked against us, can we marshal the forces available to us, from medical care to religious faith, and seek healing. Even with state-of-the-art treatment and the most profound trust in God, we may not overcome the illness. Still, with *bitachon*, with true trust, we can live with the faith that we and our families will be O.K., even if no cure is to be had.

Not every significant challenge is life-threatening. Many of us here have lost a job at one point or another, or flunked out of school, or otherwise seen our careers, our livelihoods, and our futures threatened. Again, we are only human if anger and denial are part of our response. If we are like Joshua, though, we will recognize the real obstacles to our success, some of which we may control and others entirely outside our hands. We can wander in the wilderness for forty years, or we can quiet those defeatist voices inside ourselves, just as Caleb tries to hush the complaining Israelites. With *bitachon*, true trust, we can let go of the unrealistic ideal, that the pink slip or the bad report card will go away, and face forward into a better, if different future. The outcome may not be the same as we had imagined our first choice to be, but perhaps it will be better, however different and however long it takes to get there, even if it takes a lifetime, even forty years.

Tonight, we acknowledge Leah Elenzweig, on her last Shabbat as President of Congregation B'nai Israel. When Leah accepted this position, by agreeing to become Senior Vice-President way back in 2010, she could not have imagined the challenges that would face her as President. Yes, she was already a seasoned Temple leader. Having co-chaired a capital campaign, she understood the congregation's financial issues. Having co-chaired the development of a Strategic Plan, she recognized that change was necessary; and she knew that change does not come easy in a place that stirs up as much emotion as people's lifelong spiritual home. Still, Leah could not have predicted the challenges that actually did face her as Senior Vice-President and President: a challenging and long rabbinical transition, a time without a rabbi, working with a veritable bevy of guest, interim, consultant, interim, and so-called "permanent" rabbis, each with a different style and set of priorities. Leah could not have imagined the turnover we would face in our office or the effort required to set Temple administration and finance on a firm foundation. Nobody plans to work full-time in a volunteer position.

Leah has faced each of these challenges with honesty and realism, and also with faith. Like Joshua and Caleb before her, she acknowledged every challenge, she eschewed denial, and she strategized about solutions. Most importantly, with partners lay and rabbinic, human and Divine, Leah trusted that Congregation B'nai Israel would continue to pursue and achieve its sacred and historic mission.

As a rabbi, I have learned a great deal from this year of partnership with Leah. Like Joshua, she has taught me to remain optimistic, even as we

acknowledge the challenges in our path. Like Caleb, she has taught me to work through real obstacles to build a better future. Ours is a better congregation, and I am a better rabbi, because Leah Elenzweig has been our president.

Now, Leah enters a new phase of Temple leadership, and David Bauman prepares to become our President. Giants continue to loom, and we yet have high walls to scale. For example, though we all believe and hope we are on the right track, we still have a distance to travel before achieving the goal of assuring peak effectiveness and job satisfaction in our office. We know, too, that other giants, and other walls, some we may not even be able to imagine tonight, await us all in the future, as individuals and as a congregation, as a State and as a Jewish people, as a nation and as a human family.

With *bitachon*, true trust, may we all follow the example set by Joshua and Caleb and by Leah Elenzweig: Let us never deny the challenges before us. Let us always live with faith that even the greatest obstacles can be overcome. And let us trust that, even if each outcome isn't what we originally had in mind, with God's help, we can reach the Promised Land, together.

Amen.