



Leadership and Diversity • Parshat Shelah

Diversity in groups creates a higher chance of seeing positive change, according to Forbes Council Panel in the “14 Important Benefits of a More Diverse Leadership Team” (June 24, 2021). Because society is diverse, diverse leadership means “greater depth and breadth of experience and perspective.” Diversity increases awareness of different pockets of society, sensitivity to other ways of looking at the same scenario or set of facts, and “pressure-tests assumptions and judgments.” This almost always maximizes learning, innovation and honesty. Diverse groups help create more inclusive decisions and outcomes.

“Every team must be made up of people with different roles, strengths, temperaments and perspectives,” writes Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in his essay “The Counterpoint of Leadership” (Tetzaveh, *Lessons in Leadership*). “They must always be open to criticism and they must always be on the alert against groupthink. The glory of Judaism is its insistence that only in heaven is there one commanding Voice. Down here on earth no individual may ever hold a monopoly of leadership.”

Diversity in teams has many positive dimensions, but it’s not always easy to create or navigate. Jon Katzenbach writes in *The Wisdom of Teams*, that,

“Teams do not seek consensus; they seek the best answer.” If there is too much consensus, then diversity fails in its value.

This is apparent when reading this week’s Torah portion, *Shelah*. “Send agents to scout the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelite people...” (Num. 13:2), we read as we open the parsha. Whereas God generally told Moses what to do, here He imbued Moses with the authority to select leaders for this reconnaissance mission from each of the twelve tribes: “...send one participant (*ish ehad, ish ehad*) from each of their ancestral tribes, each one a chief (*nasi*) among them.” The verse stresses both the singularity of each leader within his tribe and the group as a whole who must work together as one.

Rashi explains that “each one was a leader among them.” Seforno adds that the individual selected had to be the best leader from his tribe, one who could recognize the significance of the land. For Rashi, it’s a leader. For Seforno, it’s *the* leader. Moses needed to think very carefully about the qualities of each person and the composition of the group. Select the wrong people or the right individuals but not a productive combination of them, and the mission would fail. And the mission did fail.

The Torah names each person selected according to his tribe. These men had a historic role. People long into the future would need to know their names. Each of these leaders carried the important task of evaluating the land according to Moses' specific objectives: "See what kind of country it is" (Num. 13:18), he told them.

Are the people who dwell in it strong or weak, few or many?

Is the country in which they dwell good or bad?

Are the towns they live in open or fortified?

Is the soil rich or poor?

Is it wooded or not? (Num. 13:18-20).

Moses concluded with one request, "And take pains to bring back some of the fruit of the land." It was the grape harvest season. Seeing is believing. When the people saw the sweet and large fruit, they would be impressed and feel motivated to complete the journey with enthusiasm. The tribal leaders were to figure this out together and present one report.

Nahmanides wonders why Moses sent out the mission in the first place. It was a risk. If the report was negative was Moses going to take the people back to Egypt? Certainly not. Nahmanides explains that the Israelites wanted a group to reconnoiter the land as a standard procedure of military incursions in other foreign armies so that they could prepare themselves properly for war. Joshua did the same.

These leaders answered the questions and started on a high note: "We came to the land you sent us to; it does indeed flow with milk and honey, and this is its fruit" (Num. 13:27). But immediately afterwards, they injected their own pessimism into the report, sharing how many enemies lived

in the land and how well fortified they were: "The country that we traversed and scouted is one that devours its settlers. All the people that we saw in it are of great size;

we saw the Nephilim there—the Anakites are part of the Nephilim—and we looked like grasshoppers to ourselves, and so we must have looked to them" (Num. 13:32-33). Now, closer than ever to the Promised Land, the people lost all hope: "The whole community broke into loud cries, and the people wept that night" (Num. 14:1).

Here is where diversity does its hardest work. Caleb, one of the scouts from the tribe of Judah – the tribe most associated with leadership – protested. He was not prepared to speak with one voice, the voice of fear. Instead, he spoke with the voice of courage and destiny: "Caleb hushed the people before Moses and said, "Let us by all means go up, and we shall gain possession of it, for we shall surely overcome it" (Num. 13:30). Caleb met fear with mettle and valor. He spoke these words before Moses to assure the people that Moses' intentions were good and his judgment was sound. It must not have been easy to contradict the group, who compared themselves to grasshoppers.

Caleb was no grasshopper. He discouraged insect-like smallness and reminded the people of their own power to change their destiny and rise to the occasion. And he left us with a greater understanding of diversity's importance. Sometimes it's not consensus that creates greatness, but listening to the still, small minority voice of hope.

What leadership group do you belong to that would benefit from more diversity?