



How to Stand in Minority

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Parashat Shelah confronts us with a poignant question that touches our personal lives from time to time: How do we hold fast to a minority opinion? How can we align ourselves with Yehoshua and Calev, resisting the temptation to join the majority consensus of the spies?

Out of the twelve people sent to scout the land, only two avoid falling into the trap of fear and anxiety—a trap that swings between paralyzing dread and reckless, impulsive action. On the one hand, as the verses tell us, to feel: “However, the people who inhabit the country are powerful.... We cannot attack that people, for it is stronger than we” (Numbers 13:28,31); and on the other hand, to act impulsively: “They rose early next morning and set out for the crest of the hill country... they defiantly marched toward the crest of the hill country” (14:40,44).

Only two remained free of these extremes. What can we learn from Yehoshua and Calev about the capacity to hold a minority position without giving in to despair or capitulation?

A brief discussion in Massekhet Sotah (34b) interprets the verses of the spies narrative, offering a window into the distinct mindsets and awareness of Yehoshua and Calev that may have allowed them to break away from the path of their fellow scouts.



Yehoshua, “may God save you”

On the eve of the spies’ departure to the land of Canaan, after the Torah lists the names of all those sent to scout the land, the verses come back to one specific name: Yehoshua. This repetition encapsulates a significant—indeed, formative—moment between Yehoshua and Moshe:

במדבר יג:א-ב,ד,טז

¹וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: ²שְׁלַח לְךָ אַנְשִׁים וַיִּתְּרוּ אֶת אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי נֹתֵן לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אִישׁ אֶחָד
אִישׁ אֶחָד לְמִטָּה אֲבֹתָיו תִּשְׁלָחוּ כָל נָשִׂיא בְהֵם: ... ⁴וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹתָם: ... ¹⁶אֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת הָאֲנָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר שְׁלַח
מֹשֶׁה לְתוֹר אֶת הָאָרֶץ וַיִּקְרָא מֹשֶׁה לְהוֹשֶׁעַ בֶּן נּוּן יְהוֹשֻׁעַ:

Numbers 13:1-2,4,16

¹God spoke to Moshe, saying, ²“Send men to scout the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelite people; send one man from each of their ancestral tribes, every one a leader among them.” ... ⁴And these were their names... ¹⁶These were the names of the men whom Moshe sent to scout the land; and Moses changed the name of Hoshea son of Nun to Yehoshua.

What is the meaning behind Moshe’s renaming of his disciple? The talmudic passage in Sotah explains it this way:

תלמוד בבלי סוטה לד:

יְהוֹשֻׁעַ כָּבַד בְּקֹשׁ מֹשֶׁה עָלָיו רַחֲמִים, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: “וַיִּקְרָא מֹשֶׁה לְהוֹשֶׁעַ בֶּן נּוּן יְהוֹשֻׁעַ”, יֵהּ יוֹשִׁיעַךְ מֵעֲצָת מְרַגְלִים.

Babylonian Talmud Sotah 34b

As for Yeshoshua, Moshe had already pleaded for mercy on his behalf, as it is said: “And Moshe changed the name of Hoshea son of Nun to Yehoshua—meaning, “May God (Yah) save you (*yoshi’akha*) from the counsel of the spies.”

According to this account, Moshe was filled with apprehension as the spies departed. He pleaded for mercy and prayed for Yehoshua by adding a deeply significant letter to his name—a letter representing the Divine Name. One could view the addition of the letter *yod* through a magical lens: changing a person's name and embedding God's name within it functions as a protective amulet, shielding them from harm. However, we can also understand Moshe's action in an existential way: Yehoshua, with his new name, now carries God's name inside himself. The addition of the *yod* is Moshe's gift to Yehoshua, an invitation into an intimate relationship with the Holy Blessed One as an active transcendent presence accompanying him through every dimension of his life, an entity Who critiques, expects, and demands that he live by the highest standards.

Standing against a majority can easily breed fear, doubt, and insecurity about one's minority position. Yet, weaving this letter into Yehoshua's name transforms his stance against the crowd into an expression of his relationship with God. For Yehoshua, connection to God does not mean escaping or ignoring difficult questions—such as how to confront the massive challenges of achieving sovereignty in the land. Rather, it means bringing God into the conversation and the covenant as these very questions are tackled. In this way, hardships and tensions are integrated into a relationship with God. Moshe prays for Yehoshua's capacity to resist the majority consensus, by grafting a letter of God's name into his own. For Yehoshua, this connection to God is made manifest every single time someone calls him by name.

Calev separated himself from the counsel of the spies

Like Yehoshua, Calev also chooses a distinct path. The passage in Sotah uncovers Calev's unique trajectory, through a close reading of the text. In describing the journey of the spies, the verse states: "They went up into the Negev and he came to Hebron" (Numbers 13:22). Our



Sages notice a sharp grammatical shift: while the ascent into the Negev is written in the plural (“they went up”), the arrival in Hebron is written in the singular (“he came”). The Talmud wonders: “but shouldn’t it have said, ‘and **they** came’!?” Rava resolves this discrepancy by explaining:

מִלְמַד שְׁפִירֵשׁ כָּלֵב מֵעֲצַת מְרַגְלִים, וְהֵלֵךְ וְנִשְׁתַּטַּח עַל קִבְרֵי אֲבוֹת.

This teaches that Calev separated himself from the counsel of the spies, and went and prostrated himself upon the graves of the ancestors.

According to Rava, this grammatical nuance isolates Calev from the rest of the spies during their journey through Canaan. Calev alone turns toward Hebron, the city of the ancestors,¹ while scouting the land. He is already walking a solitary path. Rava goes on to reveal what Calev did once he arrived in Hebron:

אָמַר לָהֶן: אֲבוֹתַי! בְּקִשׁוּ עָלַי רַחֲמִים שְׂאֲנַצִּיל מֵעֲצַת מְרַגְלִים. יְהוֹשֻׁעַ כָּבַד בְּקִשׁ מֹשֶׁה עָלָיו רַחֲמִים... וְהֵינִי דֹכְתִּיב: “וְעַבְדִּי כָלֵב עֲקֵב הָיְתָה רוּחַ אַחֲרַת עַמּוֹ וְגו’”.

He said to them, “My ancestors! Plead for mercy on my behalf, that I may be saved from the counsel of the spies. Yehoshua has already had Moshe plead for mercy on his behalf... And this is what is written, “But My servant Calev, because he had another spirit with him...” (Numbers 14:24).

Rashi anchors this midrashic interpretation with another biblical verse:

¹ Where the patriarchs and matriarchs are buried.



רש"י סוטה לד:

והיינו דכתיב "ועבדי כלב וגו' והביאותיו אל הארץ אשר בא שמה" - והיא חברון כדכתיב "ויתן את חברון לכלב" (יהושע יד:ג) ש"מ כלב הוא דאזיל לחברון:

Rashi's commentary to Sotah 34b

And this is what is written: "But My servant Calev... and I will bring him into the land wherein he went"—this refers to Hebron, as it is written, "And Yehoshua gave Hebron to Calev" (Joshua 14:13). From this we deduce that it was Calev who went to Hebron.

Calev's future connection to Hebron serves as the textual proof for our Sages to single him out as the one who parted ways with his companions. The talmudic *midrash* interprets this detour as a deliberate separation aimed at praying for the strength to resist his peers' counsel—to find the inner fortitude to stand against the majority consensus.

The other spies are entirely consumed by the immediate here and now. They focus on the overwhelming challenges of the present rather than a vision that bridges past and future. Their gaze is turned entirely inward, fixated on themselves instead of a long-term commitment.

But Calev is deeply committed to a long-term vision. By visiting the graves of the ancestors, he signals that he views himself as part of a multigenerational covenant—one that extends far before his time and, hopefully, far beyond it. He has entered history at a specific moment, and his responsibility is to ensure that this covenant is transmitted to future generations. This is precisely what his journey to Hebron symbolizes, capturing the echoes of both past and future held within that city. He understands that scouting the land of Canaan is merely a vehicle for realizing a much greater vision, a realization that demands immense patience and perspective.



If Yehoshua teaches us about God's presence in the present, Calev teaches us about our responsibility to the generations. Calev does not simply ask, "What am I feeling right now?" Instead, he asks, "What story do I belong to, and what am I passing down?" His journey to Hebron is a definitive choice: "I will not let a moment of fear rupture a multi-generational covenant."

* * *

These two forces—the presence of God in our lives and our belonging to a multigenerational covenant—are Yehoshua and Calev's respective answers to the question of how to stand in the breach and maintain a minority voice. How do we resist becoming part of the "counsel of the spies"? How do we stand alone? When a person is disconnected from the Holy One, isolation becomes too terrifying to bear. When a person is detached from the past and the future, the present moment feels absolute. But when we speak with God, think of God, and make room for the Divine in our language and consciousness—and when we remember that we are part of a story that begins with our ancestors and continues through the next generation—then moments of weakness do not devolve into despair. Our moments of isolation are only an illusion of loneliness. God is with us, just as our ancestors and our children are.

Perhaps this is the essence of Moshe's prayer for Yehoshua: not merely to be "saved" from the spies, but to remain a person who lives with God's name embedded within him, grounded in a story larger than himself. This, too, is Calev's choice: to remain faithful not just to what is visible to the eye, but to what has been built across generations.

Simply put, remaining steadfast in a minority opinion is not merely a matter of courage—it is a matter of connection. Connection to the Holy One, and connection to the generations. May we all find this connection.

