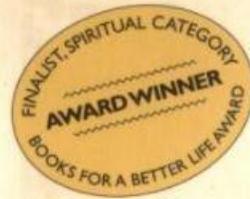


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ANCIENT SECRETS

USING THE STORIES OF
THE BIBLE TO IMPROVE
OUR EVERYDAY LIVES

R A B B I
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built a golden calf when, in the absence of their leader, Moses, their insecurities got the best of them.

In this story, the slave mentality surfaces once more. Not long ago, these people cowered before their masters; here again, they tremble before the unknown. Thus, rather than plunging ahead, they decide to send spies to check out what lies ahead.

Twelve men, one representative from each of the twelve tribes, are selected. We are told that these men are highly regarded people—chieftains, leaders, princes. This is the House of Representatives of the nation of Israel, if you will. The names of these duly elected men are inscribed in the Bible for eternity, because the outcome of their mission will, as we shall see, have extremely dire consequences for the entire people.

The first lesson of this story lies in the selection of the spies. These are the people upon whose reports the nation will rely for its next crucial step. These people must be extremely trustworthy; the future depends on their perceptions and advice. They must be chosen carefully.

We all have made such a choice. In our youth, each one of us has undoubtedly chosen someone to trust, someone to ask for advice on the road to adulthood. We have all asked someone, directly or indirectly, "What do I have to look forward to? What does the 'Promised Land' look like? You have been there. Tell me what to expect."

Most likely, the people to whom we have directed such questions have been our parents or grandparents, but they might also have been our teachers or other mentors.

We must be careful whom we choose to be a mentor; at least we should be aware of how we have been affected by our choice. Our advisers' perceptions, whether coming from a place of courage or fear, have influenced our decisions and still shape our futures. Pity the fellow who might have trusted Macbeth's assessment: "Life . . . is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

Pity, too, those whose advisers filled their ears with negative perceptions based on their own disappointments in life, such as "You can't trust anyone" or "Everyone will cheat you sooner or later."

Ten of the spies selected by the Israelites have presumably been raised by such mentors—people who, as Egyptian slaves, have come to view life through a filter of negativity and oppression. And these spies take this attitude with them on their journey.

Starting from a location in the Sinai known as Kadesh Barnea, the spies traverse the desert of the Negev, going up to Hebron, where Abraham is buried. During their travels they come to a vineyard and cut down a branch bearing a single cluster of grapes so large that two men have to carry the branch between them; they also collect other fruits to help them describe the abundance of the land.

After a journey of forty days, the spies return to give their report, describing a rich and fertile territory, just as God had promised. However, the tone of the report soon changes. Two of the spies, Caleb and Joshua, urge the nation to march forth and lay claim to the land, but the ten others speak from fear. "*The country that we traversed and scouted is one that devours settlers,*" they claim. "*All the people we saw are giants . . . we looked like grasshoppers in our own sight.*"

It's easy to imagine a modern-day parallel. Had these spies been sent to scout New York City, they would have returned talking not of the cultural attractions but of the muggings. Had they been sent to Los Angeles, they would have returned talking of riots and earthquakes. Had they ended up anywhere on the globe, they would have brought back only bad news.

Despite claims to the contrary, people everywhere love to hear bad news. The Israelites are no exceptions, so they choose to dismiss the optimistic reports of Caleb and Joshua and focus on the pessimistic reports of the others.

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The world hasn't changed much since then. We still tend to focus on the negative. It is bad news that sells newspapers. It is bad news that feeds the rumor mills. Think about it. Would you be more likely to grab the phone to tell someone that your neighbor's son earned honors in college or that he was expelled for bad behavior?

The Israelites are no different. The bad news goes around the encampment like wildfire, drowning out the good news. The Bible tells us, "*The whole community broke into loud cries, and the people wept that night. All the Israelites railed against Moses and Aaron. 'If only we had died in the land of Egypt, if only we might die in this wilderness.' . . . And they said to one another . . . 'Let us head back to Egypt.'*"

Despite the exhortations of Moses and Aaron, and in spite of the best efforts of Joshua and Caleb, the people do not quiet down. In fact, they do just the opposite: They threaten to stone those who are urging them to be calm and to trust in God.

Can the grip of fear be so strong that it causes us to abandon all faith and reason? I think the history of humanity stands as proof that this is so. Indeed, some of the best-selling New Age thinkers have posited that fear is the cause of all evil in the world. Fear leads nations to build up arsenals and go to war against other nations. Fear leads wealthy people to hoard their wealth, lest poverty strike. Fear tells us that there is never enough power or money to shield us from the unknown future.

Yet the Israelites have witnessed countless miracles; they know they have the unlimited help of God; they have made a covenant with the Creator of the world. So how can they suddenly be so utterly faithless? How can they, who have heard the very voice of God, so easily defy Him?

Herman Wouk, in his classic work *This Is My God*, explains this slave mentality:

Economists know that, contrary to the popular impression, slaves do not work hard. . . . Take away a man's rights to him-

self, and he becomes dull and sluggish, wily and evasive, a master of the arts of avoiding responsibility and expending little energy. . . . The lash stings a slave who has halted dumbly, out of indifference and inertia, into resuming the slothful pace of his fellow slaves. It can do no more. The slave's life is a dog's life, degraded, but not wearying, and—for a broken spirit—not unpleasant. Broken by slavery, [the Israelites] could not shake free of improvidence, cowardice, and idol-worship.

This is why, Wouk suggests, they were so eager to return to Egypt every time the slightest thing went wrong. Slavery, in retrospect, did not seem all that terrible. Their spirit degraded and broken through years of slavery, the Israelites could not recover their self-esteem as free people. They totally lacked confidence that they could make a life for themselves, *even with the help of God.*

However, God clearly expects them to rise above the traumatic experiences they endured in Egypt. He has given them all the necessary help. He has met them more than halfway. With signs and miracles, He has led them to the edge of the Promised Land. All they have to do is cross over. But overcome with insecurity and fear, they cannot—or will not—take this next step.

How many of us, burdened by traumatic childhood experiences, choose to bemoan our fate, blaming our parents and God rather than taking advantage of the window of opportunity to cross over to the new approach to life offered by the Promised Land? How many people refuse to take a risk and embrace life, preferring, it seems, to lead lives of quiet desperation? In my profession, I meet such people every day. For them, it is more comfortable to be a slave than to step boldly into the unknown.

One of my clients, a young man born into wealth, had been warned by his father not to trust women. All women were "gold diggers" who would chase him for his money, claimed the father, a man who had apparently been disappointed in love. Fortu-

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help