

SHELACH 5768
Be a Disciple of Caleb

What kind of person are you—the glass is half empty kind of person or half full? I have a colleague who is by nature a pessimist and wanted to form a pessimist club, but he figured it wouldn't work! Speaking of colleagues, I heard it said that an optimist is a woman who starts to put on her shoes when the Rabbi says: “And now, in conclusion...”

An optimist thinks that this is the best possible world. A pessimist fears that this is true! An optimist sees an opportunity in every difficulty. A pessimist sees a difficulty in every opportunity. The way you look at things can get you all worked up, looking at things a little differently can calm you down and be the difference between happiness and misery.

I'm a disciple of Caleb. I'm the guy with the rose-colored glasses, who looks at the cup as half full. In today's parsha, Moses sends 12 spies into the land of Israel to check it out. Their mission was to see what the land was like—good soil or bad, forests or plains, and to find out whether the inhabitants of the land were strong or weak, few or many.

After 40 days, 10 of the spies come back and report (Num. 13:28): “But the people who inhabit the land are powerful; the cities are very greatly fortified, and we also saw there the offspring of the giant...We cannot attack that people for they are stronger than we.” The 10 spies then spread the word that the country they scouted is one that, “devours its settlers...All of the people are giants and we looked like grasshoppers next to them.”

Caleb silenced them and said, “We shall surely ascend and conquer it, for we can surely do it!” Caleb along with Joshua, saw the difficulties as well as the others, but they had faith that if G-d promised this land to them, it would certainly happen. They also saw the richness of the land, the possibilities of it and most importantly, they saw themselves as partners with Gd. With that kind of partnership, how can you go wrong? They took the optimistic point of view, looked at the glass and saw it half-full rather than half-empty. It wasn't just guesswork. It was a leap of faith to believe in themselves, in their people and in Gd.

It's too bad the Israelites didn't share their faith. Perhaps it was the hundreds of years of slavery or lack of military experience. Whatever their motivation, they rebelled once again against Gd and Moses and were then condemned to wander for 40 years in the desert—one year for each day that the spies were checking out the land. The people were just not ready to live in freedom in their own land.

40 years! What a harsh sentence! And all this happened because the 10, and the people who listened to them, would not see the light, the beauty, the richness of life that would be theirs along with the struggle, the pain and the heartache that it

would take to conquer it. There's a real lesson here. After assessing the challenges we face in life...sometimes despite the odds, we must go after what we know is right and true and good. Sometimes we have to find the good in the difficult or bad, the right in the wrong, the health in the illness, the strength in the weakness, the peace in the hostility. If we only sit back and feel our despair, all we'll experience is the loss.

The Torah challenges us in this story to see the story of our lives from more than one side and to have trust in the things we see as well as the things we can't see. We sometimes come to "catastrophic conclusions" because we can't see that the glass is half full, that there is another way of looking at our situation, because we don't trust those other possibilities. Sometimes, it's more comfortable for us to continue looking at something from the negative side—gathering sympathy—than turning it upside down and seeing the positive.

The spies all saw the same land, the same inhabitants of that land, and the difficulty of conquering the land. Caleb also saw—at the same time—that Gd was with the Israelites and conquering the land was assured. After all they experienced in their recent lives with all that Gd had done for them—the 10 plagues, the crossing of the Red Sea, the manna from heaven, the 10 Commandments—how could they not believe that Gd would watch over them as they conquered the land. After all He called it the Promised Land, didn't He? And if Gd made a promise, how could it not be?

When we give someone or something the benefit of the doubt, when we allow ourselves to get away from the negative, we are acting in a way similar to Caleb, we see Gd on the other side, Gd is in the benefit of the doubt. Gd is all good. Everything is part of Gd, even all the negative things that happen in this world. When we are able to see Gd, even in the tragedies of life, we can find the light to get us through.

What Moses expected from the spies was that they would trust in Gd's promise of success and figure out ways to be partners with Gd in achieving Gd's will—doing whatever was possible to make Gd's will happen. We become partners with Gd's will as well, when we avoid catastrophic conclusions and see that there are many ways to look at a lot of life's experiences. This enables us to work with people with whom we might not agree, to understand that which was terrifying to us and to grow as human beings.

According to Bachya ben Asher in the Talmud (Shabbat 122a): "The light of a candle is useful when it leads you. It is useless when it trails behind you." When you set foot in new terrain you need a lot of light. There's a lot of darkness in the unknown, and you don't want to lose your way. The way out is to bring out the light within the darkness—the light that sometimes is hidden—keep it in front of you to guide you.

Have you ever noticed that at every *Bris* there is a special chair set aside for Elijah? No one sits on it. We place the boy on it before we give him to the *Mohel* to perform the circumcision. We simply call it, *kisey Eliyahu*, “the chair of Elijah.” The sages teach that this chair is set aside to dispel Elijah’s pessimism. One day Elijah turned toward Gd and said (I Kings 19:10): *Ki ozvu britcha*, “The Jews have left Your *Bris*, Your covenant.” They no longer want to be Jews. Judaism is doomed. Soon we will evaporate off the face of the earth.

However, according to this Midrash, Gd said: “Bite your tongue, Elijah. A Jew is not permitted to be a pessimist.” A Jew must always be an optimist. A Jew must always hope for the best and never give in to thoughts of the worst.

Therefore, Gd said to him: “Elijah, you’re going to be invited to the *Bris* of every baby boy, and a special chair will be set aside for you to show you that Jews and Judaism will never evaporate off the face of the earth. Be optimistic, never pessimistic!”

Let us all become disciples of Caleb for a Jew is not permitted to be a pessimist. We can find the light within the darkness. We just have to really search for it sometimes.

May it be Your will, Hashem, that we keep the light of the Torah shining brightly in front of us—and not behind us—so that we see where we are going and trust in it...so that we may see Your Holy Presence in all that we do, at times of doubt, as well as in times of certainty. And for the woman who just reached for her shoes, let me say, “And now in conclusion...” Amen!

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