

Spying The Future
by Rabbi Debra Orenstein

Barry Neil Kaufman, founder of the Option Institute, tells an amazing story about a young patient named Katie, whose parents brought her to him in a last-ditch effort to give her a “decent future.” She had severe disabilities and came to the Institute with a medical file several inches thick, after years of testing and treatment. Instead of discussing the history or showing the file to his staff, Kaufman asked them to work with Katie for a day and make their own assessment and recommendations, based on her spirit and preferences, as well as traditional diagnostic tools. At the end of the day, one staff member described to the parents how she had held a favorite puppet of Katie’s at arm’s length, and playfully encouraged the child to come and get it.

“She took almost five full steps to reach me. She’s a real plugger!” said Annie.

“Katie’s father leaned forward, aghast, and said, ‘But my daughter doesn’t walk.’

“Oh,’ Annie said respectfully, ‘I didn’t know.’”*

A man whose daughter “doesn’t walk” has no reason to dangle a puppet or to expect five glorious steps. The judgment that says “it can’t be done” is usually right, but mostly as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In this week’s Torah portion, ten of the twelve spies operate from a pessimistic view of the Israelites’ potential to conquer the Land. It’s a view that could easily be defended as realistic. Yet they turn out to be wrong. More than that, they are punished for their negative assessment, and the community as a whole suffers for believing them.

Many commentators question why the spies are condemned. After all, Moses asked them to investigate the land and its people. Moreover, Moses later described the Canaanites in language even more foreboding and intimidating than that of the spies: “Hear O Israel, today you are crossing the Jordan, to come and possess nations greater and mightier than yourself, cities great and fortified up to the heavens, a people great and tall, the children of giants....” (Deut. 9:1-2).

Both Moses and the spies affirm that the land is glorious; there is no question about the desirability of the goal. And all agree that the Canaanites are formidable. The key difference is that Moses puts his faith in God’s promise of victory, whereas the spies are so fearful that they dismiss it.

Moses prophesies “today you are crossing” and follows up his frightening assessment of the Canaanites with the message: “you shall know today that God

* Barry Neil Kaufman, *Happiness Is A Choice*. Fawcett, 1991, p. 201.

goes before you; as a consuming fire, God will destroy [your enemy]" (Deut. 9:3). But the ten spies lose all confidence about the final result, saying, "We cannot ascend against that people, for it is too strong for us." (Num. 13:31).

Just a few verses earlier, they make a statement that betrays their mindset and foreshadows their downfall: "[The Land] indeed flows with milk and honey, and this is its produce. But the people that dwells in the land is powerful...." (Num. 13:27-28). The key word is "but."

"Yes, but" has been the downfall of many good ideas and worthwhile missions. But this "but" is not just any "but." The Hebrew version of the word is *efes*, meaning naught or zero. The same Hebrew root in verb form means to cease, fail, or come to an end. The spies have, literally, zero expectation of the fulfillment of God's promise, and thus zero hope, zero openness, zero effectiveness as leaders. With their mindset, there is a zero percent chance for a positive future in Israel. Therefore, their role in settling the Land will be zero.

During Elul, the month leading up to the High Holidays, we wrestle with the record of the past year and consider whether and how we can do better in the next. In service of that noble reckoning, we will add Psalm 27 to the morning liturgy. The final verse declares: "Hope in Adonai; be strong, let your heart be strengthened, and hope in Adonai." The Hebrew phrase *kaveh el Adonai*, which I have translated as "hope in God," can also be translated as "wait for God" or "expect God."

Change is inherently hard and scary. We make it even more difficult when we try to navigate toward a better future without hope, patience, or positive expectation.

I have learned a little something about expectation in recent days. I am pregnant. As an "expectant" mother, I have my fears and concerns about the future. I well understand the spies, who see difficulties and danger ahead. It is easy to become scared senseless and hopeless. But, truly, I am *expecting* in the biblical sense. Even with the complications and uncertainties along the way, I have hope for a blessed outcome. I have patience to wait for God's timing. As the rest of my body swells and grows tired, my heart is strengthened. I spy a glorious future.

I hope that you feel the same about all that you have reason – and God's promise – to expect.

This article was originally published in *The Jewish Journal* of Los Angeles.