

How Do We Rise Above Groupthink? (Edited Transcript)

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One of the most startling social experiments ever conducted was the Asch Conformity Experiments. Participants were shown a single straight line, then another three straight lines, and were asked to identify which of the three matched the length of the original line. It was a simple perceptual task and respondents were expected to get it right almost 100% of the time. And they did – when they took the test on their own. But when a parallel test was set up in which seven actors gave the wrong answer, the success rate of the non-actors plummeted from over 99% to just 63.2%.

The implications are clear. We are influenced heavily and decisively by those around us, and have a tendency to conform to the opinions of others, despite the fact that, without such peer pressure, we would have acted or sided or chosen completely differently. The Asch Conformity Experiments demonstrated conclusively that we are social creatures, and we look for confirmation and affirmation from other people – second-guessing ourselves and often reversing our opinions and even our perceptions. This is called ‘groupthink’.

In this week’s Torah portion, we have a classic example of groupthink. The Jewish people are encamped on the borders of Israel and are preparing to enter the land, finally fulfilling G-d’s long-standing promise to them and their ancestors. Moses sends a delegation of the nation’s best and brightest – the 12 leaders of their respective tribes – to scout out the land of Israel and to report back on their findings. Of the 12 ‘spies’, 10 return with a catastrophically negative report. While acknowledging the beauty of the land and its fertile richness, they describe the inhabitants as formidable enemies who would be impossible to conquer, and propose the entire endeavour be scrapped.

The report of these 10 spies had devastating implications. Hysteria swept the camp, and the people even suggested appointing a new leader and returning to Egypt. In the end, G-d decreed that this generation of the newly liberated slaves would not merit to enter the land of Israel, and would wander in the desert for 40 years before the next generation entered the land.

Remarkably, two of the 12 leaders were able to chart another path. Joshua and Caleb came back with a different story. They encouraged the people to have faith in G-d and to proceed to conquer the land, and entreated them not to follow the assessment of their fellow spies. In doing so, they exhibited great courage, but also presence of mind – the intellectual and moral fortitude to see the situation the way it was, and not succumb to the opinion of the other 10 members of the delegation. Remember, these were the leaders of the Jewish People; people of considerable power and persuasion, of great moral stature and spiritual insight. To swim against this tide, to withstand the immense pressure of groupthink, was no small feat.

Joshua and Caleb went into this task with open eyes; they were aware of the magnitude of the challenge. The Gemara (Sotah 34b) relates how, on the journey through the land of Israel, Caleb stopped at the Cave of Machpeila, in Chevron, where our forefathers and foremothers are buried, and prayed to G-d for the strength to withstand the pressure of the 10 spies. Moses, himself, was concerned, particularly about his young disciple, Joshua, and changed Joshua’s name from Hoshea (Salvation) to Yehoshua (G-d will save him), as a prayer for protection from the groupthink.

There is a foundational principle in Judaism that the level of Divine reward always matches the difficulty of the task; the harder the task, the greater the reward, and vice versa. And G-d rewards Joshua and Caleb for their bravery and clarity of vision.

In framing Caleb’s reward, G-d commends him for having ‘another spirit [that] was with him’ (Bamidbar 14:24). In his commentary on this verse, Rav Elya Meir Bloch explains this to be referring to Caleb’s courage of conviction to have ‘another spirit’ from his 10 fellow spies in withstanding the pressure – the groupthink – of the delegation.

And they weren't alone. Rav Bloch explains how this ability to see things for what they really are, to not be influenced by popular opinion, was one of Abraham's greatest character traits. He brings a fascinating Mishna from Pirkei Avot: "There were 10 generations from Noah to Abraham to show how compassionate Hashem is, because all the generations acted contrary to His will until Abraham, our father, came and received the reward of all of them."

The Mishna is describing the ethical and spiritual deterioration that took hold in the world between the generations of Noah and Abraham, as people embraced idolatry and moral relativism, and how "through sheer force of character and courage of conviction" Abraham arrested the slide. He initiated a new era in the world, teaching ethical monotheism to tens of thousands of people and establishing the Jewish people as the guardians of these truths, culminating in the receiving of the Torah at Mount Sinai.

What's puzzling in the Mishna is the assertion that Abraham "received the reward of all of them". Of course, he merited reward for his own commendable actions, but what right did he have to the reward owed to those who came before him?

Rav Elya Meir explains the forces of history were stacked against Abraham, making his task exponentially more difficult "and thus his achievements exponentially greater and his reward commensurately higher. Like Joshua and Caleb, he faced the weight of groupthink" in his case, 10 generations of established opinion and practice. He entered into a world where paganism and immorality were the norm and had become more deeply entrenched with each passing generation. With each passing generation it became more difficult to be the "Abraham" "the one who would champion truth and justice and morality in the world. And according to the difficulty of the task" so is the reward. It took 10 generations worth of reward to repay Abraham adequately for withstanding 10 generations of groupthink, and staking out a new path for humanity.

Friends, we can draw on the examples of Joshua and Caleb, as well as Abraham, to inspire us to withstand the pressures of groupthink in our own lives. But, how do we do it?

One way is to proactively create a positive moral environment for ourselves and our families by associating with good people. But there is also another way. I believe there's an approach in our parsha "one that is really empowering. I mentioned earlier that Moses changed Joshua's name from Hoshea to Yehoshua. The Sforno points out Yehoshua has a double meaning "it means "he will be saved", but also that "he will save others".

And this is the secret to turning the power of groupthink and social influence on its head. Instead of being influenced and swayed by others, we can do the influencing. We can proactively use its power to change the world around us for the better. Instead of being led, we can lead. Joshua himself went on to lead the Jewish people, to inspire them with Torah values and faith in G-d. He was strong and courageous, and inspired that strength and courage in others "and it was under his leadership that the Jewish People finally entered the land of Israel.

The power of social influence presents an enormous challenge, but it also presents an enormous opportunity "the opportunity to make the world a better place.

To be a leader is to positively influence the people around us; to teach and to illuminate and to make the world a better place. We can all be leaders through our daily interactions with others, through our Torah values and ideals, through the way we live our lives.