



The Secret of Sorting Truth from Lie
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R. Yehoshua ben Levi met Mashiach and asked him: “When will you come, Master? When will you announce yourself?” Mashiach answered: “Today!” But the day passed and Mashiach did not come.

R. Yehoshua ben Levi met Elijah the Prophet and reported his encounter with Mashiach: Elijah inquired: What did he say to you...” “He spoke falsely,” complained R. Yehoshua. “He said that he would come *today*, but he did not.” Elijah explained that when Mashiach said, “Today,” he was quoting a verse from Psalms : “Today, *if you listen to His voice* [היום אם [בקרולו תשמעו]”¹ and, apparently, we did not fulfill the criterion, so Mashiach did not come.²

Everyone knows that Tisha B'Av is the lowest point of the Jewish calendar. HaShem's protective aura thins, and we grow vulnerable to error and to harm. The downward tug of this time is ancient and nearly impossible to resist. It started with the incident of the spies [Num. 13–14]; we failed to listen *in* to HaShem's voice and gave credence instead to words proffered in bad faith. The chink that precipitated that fiasco was a defect in our ability to distinguish truth from falsehood. It was a flaw in our *listening* skills. As soon as we manage to fix that fault and only take truth to heart, we will meet the condition of “heeding [HaShem's] voice (אם בקולו (תשמעו) and Mashiach will come, *today*.

Let's examine what went wrong that fateful day, the 9th of Av in the Sinai desert on the border with Israel, poised to cross into our Promised Land. There is much to learn from that mistake whose reverberations still shake our world 3,325 years later.

The sense of hearing has two channels and both malfunctioned on that fateful day. 1) Our outer ears hear words and sounds that emanate from without. 2) Our inner ear hears guidance from within. Each of our five outer senses has an inner, spiritual, equivalent. With our inner ear we sort through the barrage of stimuli (words from without, impulses from within) and separate truth from falsehood.

The *obvious* failing in the story of the spies is that we took the wrong report to heart. Ten of those scouts voiced alarm that our invasion would not succeed. They claimed the residents were mightier than us and would all but wipe us out.

“We are not able to go up against the people for they are stronger than we.” [Num. 13:31]

Two scouts dissented. Kaleb and Yehoshua urged us to trust God's promise and enter straightaway.

“We should go up at once and possess it, for we are well able to overcome it.” [Num. 13:30]

These two competing narratives were conveyed by words. Our outer ears heard them both, and we had to decide between them. We chose wrong. We went with the majority and burst into a frenzy of fear, distrust, resistance and rebellion.

“Why is HaShem bringing us to the [Promised] land only to have us die by the sword. Our wives and our children will be prey. Let's turn around and head back to Egypt.” [Num. 14:3-4]

In our hysterical clamor we betrayed our covenant of allegiance to HaShem. All of His trust-building efforts—the plagues, the split sea, the revelation of Torah, the forgiving of our Golden Calf, the manna, and water from the rock—all those proofs of fidelity counted for naught. We wept all night from baseless fear concocted from lack of faith. It was the last straw, and HaShem decreed that those who cried in vain and balked at the border would not set foot in His precious

Promised Land. The Israelites wandered the desert for forty years while the old guard died off and a new generation arose innocent and worthy of this priceless gift. That dreadful day, the 9th of Av, engraved itself into our calendar as a date predestined for tragedy.

Our moral compass failed us. Our ears heard the words, but we didn't listen *in*. We mistook lie for truth, and truth for lie. The weak link in our sense of hearing is that it reports to the personality which makes it subject to our ego defenses that censor information and distort the message if it triggers more anxiety than we can bear.

We suspected Yehoshua's motives. We were sure he was trying to hurry us on because on *that* side of the border he'd become Commander in Chief.³ We were wrong. Our inner ears misled us. They sorted through the competing assertions and detected falsehood where there was none.

This error was not as innocent as it appears. The main reason we rejected Yehoshua's narrative was from unconscious motives that skewed our judgment without us even noticing. When we crossed that border into Israel we'd be kicked out of the nest and we were terrified. In the desert we were like nursing children. HaShem gave us manna every morning, and water to our fill. We didn't need to make decisions; HaShem told us when to move and when to camp. Our clothing didn't wear and tear. There was no backbreaking agriculture; we didn't need to work for a living. In the desert we were on the dole. How terrifying it was to have to scrounge for our next meal...what if we didn't succeed; what if our crops didn't grow; what if we starved; what if we failed? We couldn't admit those mundane fears to ourselves. They were shameful for their lack of faith. So we pushed them out of sight...but they were there.

And that is what primed us to favor the narrative (proffered by ten very respectable *gedolim*³) that would delay our ingress indefinitely. That narrative provided a respectable cover for our (unacknowledged) dread of "fending for ourselves." It is not that we knowingly picked the lie. We sincerely believed their report was true. Yet the reason our compass pointed there instead of toward the truth, was because the delay they

proposed reduced our anxiety and that was a relief. We didn't consciously choose the lie, we mistook the relief it offered as proof of its truth.

This was a terrible setback, the consequences were devastating but it was not a surprise. The masses are susceptible to hysteria. They are easily riled by the oratory of their leaders. We don't expect more from them.

The big question concerns the scouts, who were *tsadikim* every one. The midrash reports that they were the *gedolei gedolim*—the most illustrious of their tribes.⁴ How did they fall so low that instead of connecting their flock to HaShem they steered the people away from G-d's word?

The *Zohar* explains it as follows.⁵ The spies understood that crossing into the holy land would initiate a new era—the socio-political-power-structure would dissolve and reconstitute into a completely different form. Now they were princes but across the border, in the new world, they'd become obsolete for leadership there requires a wholly different set of talents.

They did not wantonly scheme to sabotage *God's* plan by inventing a lie and conspiring to promote it. It was more subtle than that. Their anticipated loss of status and the anxiety it provoked threatened their self image as humble, selfless servants of the Holy One. Their hypocrisy (in this area) was too shameful to admit and so they pushed it out of sight...but it was there.

A conflict ensued between their conscious drive to promote God's will and their unconscious drive to preserve their social status. Their integrity collapsed under the strain. Their inner channel of guidance was hijacked and they were totally unaware. They sorted through the data encountered in their expedition attempting to distinguish truth from lie, but their disowned anxiety sabotaged the effort. Their neutrality was compromised. In the organic unfolding of events they assembled a narrative that was both plausible and self-serving. And they believed every word of it, which is why it worked.

Today, as then, we find ourselves confronted by competing narratives. And we, as they, must sort through a barrage of data to separate truth from lie. And if the illustrious scouts could fail so

miserably, then what hope is there for us. It is easy to see how the adversary and its supporters are stone deaf to truth—how they twist the facts to relieve their shame and keep themselves “on top.” It is harder to see (or even admit) that we must also be doing the same, at least to some degree (of course far less than they ;-). The fact that we can’t see it is no proof of innocence.

This story of the spies has lessons for how we receive unwelcomed truths when they threaten our angelic self image.

What was different about Kalev and Yehoshua, that they held their integrity and did not sway. The *midrash* explains that their secret weapon was prayer. Moshe was concerned about Yehoshua and prayed for him to resist the temptations that might arise in the course of his excursion.⁶ Kalev detoured to Hevron and prayed to HaShem at the burial spot of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs, asking for courage and clarity to always choose truth.⁷

If this story is our guide then prayer must be the key to finding our “still small voice” and taking its message to heart. The Talmud states: There is no truth except Torah. If something is true then it is a spark of Torah. But some truths are a joy to accept while others are quite annoying. When we resist a truth because it produces anxiety, we reject a piece of the Torah. But there are also lies posing as truths that need to be filtered out, and one way to detect them is by the dissonance they produce. Yet that is not a foolproof sign for all the reasons mentioned. It is a real existential predicament and the solution is prayer.

When confronted with an unwelcomed assertion claiming to be truth, and your resistance starts to grow, and your anxiety rises, and you want to shout and interject...instead say the following prayer inside your heart (or out loud if the occasion permits):

I am not afraid of truth. Whatever is true about what this person is saying let it come in and take root and let me be transformed by it. Whatever is false, let it pass through and leave no impression [neither in me nor in anyone else]. With your help HaShem I trust that it will be so.

This prayer is a way of keeping an open mind, but only taking truth to heart. We have been given a scripture that recounts our failures as well as our victories, and HaShem expects us to identify with both. There are so many strengths and good traits we receive from our biblical ancestors, but we also inherit their blind spots and fallibility. There is no escaping that fact, and the humility it requires of us.

Please HaShem, let our ears hear your guiding voice in all the moments of our life. May our inner compass guide us to the truth that is the Truth. May our leaders be trustworthy and our hearts be honest too. And let it be that on this 9th of Av Mashiach will be born *today*.

Deliver my soul, HaShem, from lying lips, From a deceitful tongue. ... My soul has long dwelt with those who hate peace. I am for peace; but when I speak, they are for war. [Psalm 120]

”הצילה נפשי משפת-שקר מלשון רמייה... רבת שקנה-לה נפשי עם שונא שלום : אני-שלום וכי אדבר המה למלחמה :

¹ Psalms 95:7.

² TB San. 98b.

³ Bmidbar Raba 16:13; *Tiferet Tsion* there. Since Kalev was Yehoshua’s friend, they assumed that he was in cahoots.

⁴ Midrash Tanchuma, Shelach 4 (calls them *gedolim*); Midrash Agada, Shelach 3; Bmidbar Rabba 16:5. *Yedid Nefesh* on Zohar 2:158a. In the language of kabbala, the souls of the spies came from the sparks that broke through the *yesod* of *aba*, and in *Pri Etz Chayim* on Purim, the Ari describes Mordecai’s soul in exactly this way.

⁵ Zohar 3:158a (*sof*). "All of them were *tsadikim* and heads of Israel. But they advised themselves badly. Why? They said to themselves: "If Israel enters into the Land, we will be demoted from being "heads." Moshe will appoint new leaders. We only merit to our leadership positions in the desert. But in the [new] Land we will not merit to leadership.' And because they took corrupt advise upon themselves, they died and all those who listened to them died as well."

⁶ TB Stota 34b

⁷ Zohar 3:158b; TB Sota 34b.