

Parshat Shelach
Meraglim, Minyan, and Mind
Maharat Miriam Gonczarska - Class of 2015

Our Sages derive the number of members required for a Minyan (a Quorum) from the ten Meraglim (spies) who slandered the Land of Israel, as described in Parshat Shelach. (See Babylonian Talmud, Megilla 23b.)

This seems like a strange source to derive this requirement. Why should an assembly of ten men who had no faith in God be the model for our assemblies in prayer to sanctify the Name of God?

Yet, is it possible that despite making a disastrous mistake, there was something worthwhile in the experience of the Meraglim, which can be helpful in constructing a community of faith?

In Numbers 13:22, we have the Torah's description of the potential challenges in the land of Israel: the Meraglim traveled to Hebron

...וְשָׁם אַחִימָן שֵׁשַׁי וְתַלְמִי יְלִידֵי הָעֵבֶקֶת...

...where lived Ahiman, Sheshai, and Talmi, the offspring of Anak.
[said to be a race of giants]

Let us see the description that the spies gave and where the conversation went:

אָפָּס כִּי־עַז הָעָם הַיֹּשֵׁב בְּאֶרֶץ וְהָעָרִים בְּצִרּוֹת גְּדֹלוֹת מְאֹד וְגַם־יְלִדֵי הָעֵבֶקֶת רְאִינוּ שָׁם

However, the people who inhabit the country are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large; moreover, we saw the Anakites there.

עֲמַלְקִים יוֹשְׁבֵי בְּאֶרֶץ הַנֶּגֶב וְהַחִתִּים וְהַיְבוּסִים וְהָאֱמֹרִי יוֹשְׁבֵי בְּהָרִים וְהַכְּנַעֲנִים יוֹשְׁבֵי עַל־הַיָּם וְעַל־יַד הַיַּרְדֵּן

Amalekites dwell in the Negeb region; Hittites, Jebusites, and Amorites inhabit the hill country; and Canaanites dwell by the Sea and along the Jordan."

Notice how they included more nations.

Now Caleb challenges them:

וַיַּחֲסֵם כָּל־בְּלִבְ אֶת־הָעָם אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר עָלֶיהָ נַעֲלֶה וְנִרְשְׁנֶה אֹתָהּ כִּי־יָכוֹל נוֹכַח לָהּ

Caleb hushed the people before Moses and said, "Let us by all means go up, and we shall gain possession of it, for we shall surely overcome it."

This throws the spies into defense mode:

וְהָאֲנָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר־עָלוּ עִמוֹ אָמְרוּ לֹא נוֹכַח לַעֲלוֹת אֶל־הָעָם כִּי־חַזָּק הוּא מִמֶּנּוּ

But the men who had gone up with him said, "We cannot attack that people, for it is stronger than we."

Then they start to exaggerate:



וַיִּצְיֵאוּ דַבַּת הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר תָּרוּ אֵתָּה אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר עָבְרָנוּ בָּהּ לְתוֹר אֵתָּה אֶרֶץ אֹכֵלֶת יוֹשְׁבֵיהָ הִוא
וְכָל-הָעָם אֲשֶׁר-רָאִינוּ בְּתוֹכָהּ אַנְשֵׁי מְדוֹת

Thus, they spread slander among the Israelites about the land they had scouted, saying, “The country that we traversed and scouted is one that devours its settlers. All the people that we saw in it are men of great size.”

They have now started to create their own version of reality:

So how did we go from “giants”, to “the land that devours its settlers”?

Many commentators have excellent explanations for what the spies saw, and that they had some objective evidence for their descriptions. Yet, what if it was true, but only subjectively?

Perhaps this came about as a result of their own shared stress of being spies, experiencing together potentially dangerous encounters with the giants. This possibility might be helpful in understanding the relationship between the Meraglim and formation of a Minyan.

Fear is a fascinating emotion. In our brain, the fear response is produced in the amygdala, a part of the brain in the shape of an almond, situated just behind each of our eyes. This small area produces, among others, stress hormones.

When a person sees an object, photons bounce off it and enter our eyes. This initiates a complex chemical and electrical reaction on our eye’s retina, which then sends a signal to our brain. In a normal situation, this signal travels a long path in the brain until it is processed by the cortex, the cognitive layer of the brain. However, when a fearful situation is detected, this signal goes directly to the brain’s limbic system, whose job is to react to life-threatening situations and to facilitate “fight or flight” responses. The brain stores this data in an easily accessible location for future reference.

With time and with every retelling of the scary event, some details can fall away, and others can get exaggerated. We say that neurons which fire together wire together – the more we do something, the more pathways in the brain we develop, the easier it becomes. There is also a social analog of this mechanism. Total strangers often become best friends as result of a traumatic event experienced together. There is also a separate but related phenomenon called groupthink - people in groups are more likely to accept irrational statements as truth.

Many of us have experienced such a story telling time, where we sat peacefully and safely around a fireplace, telling each other scary stories. The imagined monsters and dragons becoming bigger and scarier - first in the minds of the listeners, then even in the mind of the storyteller. We see how others react to what we are sharing, and it affects our perspective.

In such a case, would it not be better for people to live in solitude? That way we would not be able to “influence” each other with inaccurate thinking patterns and memories. Yet, it is not the conclusion that our tradition makes, and for a good reason.

An individual mind cannot function without community. We use language to create meaningful exchanges. Individual conscious self-awareness can only evolve and be maintained in interactions with others. Isolation from others is an alienation from the social parts of ourselves. The proclamation of the holiness of God, as objective reality, can happen only in communal settings. The Torah teaches:

וְנִקְדַּשְׁתִּי בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

I will be sanctified among the Children of Israel
(Leviticus 22:32)

God collects the prayers reverberating in each of our separate minds and unites us, allowing for God's presence (the Shechinah) to descend. Collective fear, devotion, or love of God can be a source of the "social glue" not only on interpersonal, but also on the biological neuronal levels. The shared narratives cement the relationship. This same mechanism – community itself, which can make giants even bigger – can make the Name of God greater. Answering parts of the prayer, even by saying Amen, is like the conversation between Meraglim. It allows our feelings to elevate us, Kedusha - the sanctity - increases with each exchange.

Consciousness is one light reflecting in a multitude of mirrors. The starting point, the level of holiness, is almost irrelevant – since each human being, each unit of consciousness (each mind) comes from God, and on some level any ten Jews is enough. One does not have to be perfect to be part of a Quorum. To participate in this transformational process, only a minimal level of right intent is required. Therefore, we learn the source of the Minyan from the Meraglim.

As many of us now re-enter our places of worship, we should try to unite in the recollection of our own holiness. This can help us to truly worship God and release our full spiritual potential. Let us try to do it in a way that we can see and hear marginalized voices in our communities. Let us now connect - not through fear, but through love for each other and God.



Maharat Miriam Gonczarska grew up in Warsaw, Poland. She became involved in the revival of Jewish life in Poland beginning in the early 1990s. Miriam pursued her studies in Israel at Nishmat, Matan, and Pardes. She has worked at the Lauder Foundation, Europe Magazine, Aish Hatorah Women's College in Belarus, and at the Hebrew Section of Polish Radio as a journalist. For many years she was an educator for the Jewish Community of Warsaw, served as a member of the Council of the Union of the Jewish Community of Poland and was a member of the Religious Board of the Union, as well as a member of the board of the Council of Christians and Jews. Miriam was actively involved in the Second-Generation Association in Poland. She has written articles that have appeared in numerous publications and websites including www.jewish.org.pl. Currently, she lives in New York where she writes and teaches Torah online in various settings, and does pastoral counseling, with a particular focus on the context of Polish Jewish heritage. Besides issues of post-Holocaust Jewish religious identities, and spiritual,

intellectual heritage, she continues her independent studies in the sciences of the brain, physics and questions relating to the nature of consciousness.