

Text Study: Believing Change Is Possible Despite Challenges

After saying the blessing before study, read the following text and discuss the questions that follow.

Arriving at the wilderness of Paran, the Israelites are given their first opportunity to enter the Promised Land. Moses sends 12 men, each a leader among the Israelites, to scout out the land. The scouts are to collect information about the strengths and weaknesses of the military, economic, and natural resources of the land of Canaan. They return with ripe fruits and with conflicting reports about the challenges ahead.

במדבר פרק יג - כה - יד: א

וַיָּשׁבוּ מִתּוֹר הָאָרֶץ מִקֶּץ אַרְבַּעִים יוֹם: וַיָּלְכוּ וַיִּבְאוּ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל־אַהֲרֹן וְאֶל־כָּל־עֵדֻת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־מִדְבַּר פָּאֲרָן קְדֻשָּׁה וַיֹּשְׁבוּ אֹתָם דָּבָר וְאֶת־כָּל־הַעֲדָה וַיֵּרְאוּם אֶת־פְּרֵי הָאָרֶץ: וַיִּסְפְּרוּ־לוֹ וַיֹּאמְרוּ בְּאָנּוּ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר שָׁלַחְתָּנוּ וְגַם זִבַת חֶלֶב וַיִּדְבֹּשׁ הוּא וְזֶה־פְרִיָּהּ: אֶפֶס כִּי־עַז הָעָם הַיֹּשֵׁב בָּאָרֶץ וְהָעָרִים בְּצֻרוֹת גְּדֹלֹת מְאֹד וְגַם־יְלָדֵי הָעֵנָק רָאִינוּ שָׁם: ... וַיִּהְיֶה כָּל־בְּנֵי אֶת־הָעָם אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמְרוּ עָלֶיךָ נִעְלָה וַיִּרְשָׁנוּ אֹתָהּ כִּי־יָכוֹל נוֹכַח לָהּ: וְהָאֲנָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר עָלּוּ עִמּוֹ אָמְרוּ לֹא נוֹכַח לַעֲלֹת אֶל־הָעָם כִּי־חָזַק הוּא מִמֶּנּוּ: וַיֹּצִיאוּ דִבְתֵּי הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר תָּרִי אֹתָהּ אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר... וְנָהִי בְעֵינֵינוּ כְּחַגְבִּים וְכִן הָיִינוּ בְּעֵינֵיהֶם: וַתִּשָּׂא כָּל־הַעֲדָה וַיִּתְּנוּ אֶת־קוֹלָם וַיִּבְכוּ הָעָם בְּלַילָה הַהוּא:

At the end of forty days they (the 12 scouts) returned from scouting the land. They went straight to Moses and Aaron and the whole community at *Kadesh* in the wilderness of *Paran* and they made their report to them and to the whole community, as they showed them the fruit of the land. This is what they told them, “We came to the land you sent us to; it does indeed flow with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. However, the people who inhabit the country are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large, moreover, we saw the *Anakites* (giants) there... 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.” ... But the men who had gone up with him said...and we looked like grasshoppers to ourselves and so we must have looked to them.” The whole community broke into loud cries, and the people wept that night. (Numbers 13: 25-14:1)



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Questions for Discussion

1. The 12 scouts return in agreement about the present state: the Promised Land is flowing with milk and honey. Yet they differ in their reports about the challenges ahead. The majority believe the challenges are insurmountable. Although the text does not clearly state why the majority of scouts held a pessimistic outlook, it does hint at an explanation. What explanation do you see in the text? What are other possible explanations for why these leaders might have been unable to see the opportunities beyond the challenges?
2. Rabbi Abraham Chill explains that the scouts focused on the challenges ahead, instead of the opportunities, because of their personal approach to change. Based on the teachings of the *Tosafot*, he writes regarding the scouts “If one is confronted by the necessity to make a choice, preference should be for positive thinking...The dynamics of positive thinking should supplant the debilitation of negative defense.” (The Sidrot, Geffen Publications, Jerusalem, 1983, p. 132). In what ways does positive thinking impact decision making? Share a time when positive thinking was an essential ingredient in enabling you to be successful in the face of a challenge. What role do you think positive thinking will play in your RE-IMAGINE Task Force’s efforts to be champions for change?
3. In order for change to happen, leaders must believe that change is possible. Belief comes from an intersection of facts and faith. Menachem Mendl of Kotzk writes that “Truth [what is the real situation] and faith [belief in what is possible] are locked arm and arm; no person acquires truth easily or with attention to the superficial, but with toil and effort, with wisdom and understanding. And the spies did not strain for the truth...they stopped (stood) with their vision contracted and false...” Faith informs fact and fact informs faith. Thinking back to the work you have done in The RE-IMAGINE Project and the stories you have heard today, how are faith and fact intertwining to inform your belief that change is possible?
4. Caleb gives the minority opinion, “Let us by all means go up...for we shall surely overcome it.” He saw the challenges, acknowledged them, and had faith the Israelites could overcome them. Today’s presenters could have spoken like the majority of the scouts, but instead they led like Caleb. *To the presenters:* What made you believe that change was possible? If you had doubt, how did you overcome it? What influence did your belief that change is possible have on others? How essential was that belief to turn hopes and dreams into reality?

Background

Rabbi Abraham Chill, born in New York City, attended Yeshiva University and received his ordination from Chief Rabbi Kook in Jerusalem. He is the author of many books about modern Jewish life including [The Mitzvot: The Commandments and Their Rationale](#).

Tosafot are critical remarks and notes on selective passages of the Talmud that were written mostly by unknown Jewish scholars in Germany, in Italy, and especially in France during the 12th to 14th century.

Menachem Mendl of Kotzk, The Kotzker Rebbe, 1787-1859, was a renowned Chassidic leader, and forerunner of the "Ger" Chassidic dynasty. A contemporary collection of his teachings about truth, a topic of great interest to him, is entitled "And Nothing But the Truth." He spent the last twenty years of his life in seclusion.



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