

Perceptions Create Reality: Consequences for Synagogue Transformation Work

ECE Text Study by Roy Young, Temple Emanuel, Beverly Hills

Introduction

As a participant in the ECE at your congregation, you have undoubtedly encountered situations in which members of some group (be it a task force, working group, leadership team or committee) agree on the relevant facts about the obstacles you face, but disagree on the interpretation or consequences of these facts and a course of action.

What accounts for the differences in perceptions? How do you reconcile conflicting perceptions? What makes one point of view or outlook more persuasive? How do you consider the likely reactions of your community? How do you move forward?

In the reports of the 12 scouts sent by Moses to investigate the Land of Israel we hear two different reports about the same environment and future prospects. The majority is pessimistic, “seeing” insurmountable barriers to conquering the land and concluding that defeat is certain. But, one scout, Caleb, is an optimistic leader imbued with a spirit that leads him to a very different conclusion. Still, the people are more convinced by the majority prediction of dire consequences and wish to return to the oppressive but safe existence as slaves in Egypt. The texts quoted below give us a mirror to examine our perceptions, the perceptions of other leaders and the perceptions of the community, as we tackle the obstacles we face in our work to transform our congregations.

Read the Torah texts and Rabbinic commentaries in Part A through Part D below, stopping to discuss your answers to the questions posed after each section.

Part A. Reports from the Scouts

Numbers, Ch. 13, Vs. 27-30

“This is what they (10 of 12 scouts) told him (Moses, but in the presence of Aaron and the Children of Israel): ‘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 Anakites there. Amalekites dwell in the Negeb region; Hittites, Jebusites and Amorites inhabit the hill country; and Canaanites dwell by the Sea and along the Jordan.’ (*Verses 27-29*)

“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.’” (*Verse 30*)

Questions:

1. **How does Caleb’s report differ from the report of the other scouts?**
2. **What might account for Caleb’s ability and willingness to disagree with the others?**

A later verse in the Torah and a Rabbinic midrash answer question #2 in the following way:

1. *Numbers: Chapter 14, Verse 24:*

“But My servant Caleb, because he had a different spirit within him . . .”

2. *Bava Sotah 34a:*

“And they went up into the south, but he came unto Hebron” (Numbers, 13:22). One would have expected the text to say, ‘THEY came.’ However, according to Rava, ‘HE came’ implies that Caleb disassociated himself from the counsel of the scouts and went off (to Hebron) to prostrate himself on the graves of the patriarchs and to plead: My fathers, beseech mercy in my behalf, that I may be delivered from the counsel of the scouts. . . As for the fulfillment of Caleb’s prayer, the Torah says, ‘Caleb . . . had a different spirit within him. . .’” (Numbers 14: 24).

Questions:

1. **What does this midrash teach us about the “different spirit” that Caleb has?**
2. **In your work in ECE, have you experienced or witnessed a “different spirit” in someone that was at least in part responsible for a specific accomplishment?**

Part B. The Negativity of the 10 Scouts Escalates

(Numbers: Chapter 13, Verses 31-33)

“But the men who had gone up with him said, ‘We cannot attack that people, for it is stronger than we.’ Thus they spread calumnies 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; we saw the Nephilim there – the Anakites are part of the Nephilim – and we looked like grasshoppers to ourselves, and so we must have looked to them.’”

Questions:

1. **How did the report from the 10 negative scouts change after Caleb spoke (see verses in previous section)? Why?**
2. **When have you had to reconcile the inevitable tensions that arise among leaders who have “spirits” which differ? What worked? What didn’t?**
3. **In general, would you say your reports about your ECE work are more like the reports of the 10 scouts or more like those of Caleb? How so?**

The following Rabbinic commentaries suggest that our perceptions can lead us to a distorted conclusion:

Bava Sotah 35a; Tanhuma, Shelah, 7

“And we were in our own eyes as grasshoppers, and so we were in their eyes” (Chapter 13, Verse 33). The Holy One said to the scouts: You don’t know what you have just let your mouths utter. I am ready to put up with your saying “We were in our own eyes as grasshoppers.” But I do take offense at your asserting “And so were we in their eyes.” Could you possibly know but that in their eyes you were like angels?

R. Mesharsheya said: The scouts were liars. As to “We were in our own eyes as grasshoppers” – sure enough being cowards, they knew it; but how did they know that “so we were in their eyes”?

Moreover the scouts were not only liars but also fools. Because when a city’s inhabitants provided the funeral meal for the mourners, they served it under tall cedar trees. At the sight of such a gathering, the scouts scampered high up in the trees and sat there hiding. There they heard the people saying jokingly: Up in the trees we espy human beings as tiny as grasshoppers.

1. **Do we worry too much about how others see us? Is it possible to know the truth about how others see us? What’s the benefit?**
2. **What are our perceptions of what non-ECE leaders think about our work? How do our perceptions impact our efforts?**

Part C. Community Reaction to the Reports

(Numbers: Chapter 14, verses 1-4)

“The whole community broke into loud cries, and the people wept that night. All the Israelites railed against Moses and Aaron. ‘If only we had died in the land of Egypt,’ the whole community shouted at them, ‘or if only we might die in this wilderness! Why is the Lord taking us to that land to fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be carried off! It would be better for us to go back to Egypt!’ And they said to one another, ‘Let us head back for Egypt.’”

Questions:

1. **What was the consequence of the scouting reports?**

2. How can we guard against this happening in our congregations when we make recommendations or implement new programs?

The following commentary teaches how the negative word spread quickly to all parts of the community and then became a unified voice of negativity and fear:

Yalkut, Shelah, 743

“And all the congregation lifted up their voice, and cried” (*Numbers: 14:1*). When the scouts returned from reconnoitering the Land, they scattered at once among the several tribes, each scout to his own tribe. There each scout flung himself into every corner of his house, crying and weeping, as one who has just had a death in his family. When his sons and daughters came and asked, “Sir, what ails you?” he made believe, as he stood up, that he was about to collapse, yet managed to say, “Alas, alas, I grieve for you my sons, my daughters, my daughters-in-law. How the Amorites will abuse you! How they will lord it over you! How can anyone face the Amorites (much less resist them)?” Then all – the sons, daughters, daughters-in-law – began to sob loudly. When the neighbors heard the sobbing, they too began to weep – thus each family made its weeping heard by the next, until throughout the tribe there was nothing but weeping.

At the same time, each of his fellow scouts brought his family to weeping, until the sixty myriads (of Israel) became a single company, all of them sobbing, so that the sound of their weeping reached on high.

Questions

- 1. How did the negative reports spread?**
- 2. What do you do to combat rapidly spreading perceptions in your community that are harmful and potentially destructive?**

Closing Thoughts

Like the scouts, we in ECE must explore the terrain around us, be it physical, emotional, psychological or spiritual. Like the scouts, our perceptions can lead us to “limiting assumptions” about the obstacles we face **OR** our perceptions can lead us to visions of possibilities. And like the scouts, our assessments can result in decisions by the leaders and the community to assume risks and move forward or to retreat to unsatisfactory, but familiar, territory. Our **PERCEPTIONS** of present conditions and future prospects – not the **FACTUAL** conditions and prospects – shape the reality we experience. Our own beliefs and assessments and those of others lead us to hope and opportunity **OR** depression and paralysis. As we see from the story of the scouts, leaders in our community can have very different beliefs and interpretations of the same conditions and circumstances. What we do with our own beliefs and interpretations and those of others has important consequences for our communities as we work to transform our synagogues.

Sources: The JPS Torah Commentary, Numbers, edited by Jacob Milgrom; The Five Books of Moses, translated by Everett Fox; Studies in Bamidbar, by Nehama Leibowitz; The Book of Legends, edited by Hayim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky; Eliezer Diamond, commentary on Shelah Lekha in Learning Torah With , 5755.