

## What Made Joshua and Caleb Different?

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The twelve men sent by Moses to explore the land of Israel came back with a wholly misleading report. They said:

“We cannot go up against those people, for they are stronger than us . . . The land which we have journeyed through and scouted is a land that consumes its inhabitants; and all the people we saw were tall and broad to a man.”

Num. 13:31-32

In fact, as we later discover in the book of Joshua, the inhabitants of the land were terrified of the Israelites. When Joshua sent spies to Jericho, Rahab told them “A great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you.” When the people heard what God had done for the Israelites, “our hearts melted in fear and everyone’s courage failed because of you” (Josh. 2:9-11).

The spies should have known this. They themselves had sung at the Red Sea:

“The people of Canaan melted away; terror and dread fell upon them.”

Ex. 15:15-16

The spies were guilty of an attribution error, assuming that others felt as they did. They said, “We were like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and so we were in their eyes” (Num. 13:33). But as the

Kotzker Rebbe noted, they were entitled to make the first claim. Just not the second. They knew how they themselves felt, but they had no idea how the people of the land felt. They were terrified of the Canaanites and failed to see that the Canaanites were terrified of them.

Now there are two obvious questions: First, why did ten spies make this mistake? Second, why did two of them, Joshua and Caleb, not make it?

Stanford University psychologist Carol Dweck has written a fascinating book, *Mindset*<sup>[1]</sup>, on why some people fulfil their potential, while others do not. Her interest, she says, was aroused when she observed the behaviour of 10-year-old children when given puzzles to solve. Some, when the puzzles became difficult, thrived. They relished the challenge, even when it proved too hard for them. Others became anxious. When the puzzles became hard, they were easily discouraged and quick to give up.

She wanted to understand why. What makes the difference between people who enjoy being tested and those who don't? What makes some people grow through adversity while others become demoralised? Her research drove her to the conclusion that it is a matter of mindset. Some see their abilities as given and unalterable. We just are gifted or ordinary, and there is not much we can do about it. She calls this the "fixed mindset". Others believe that we grow through our efforts. Where they do not succeed, they don't define this as failure but as a learning experience. She calls this the "growth mindset".

Those with a fixed mindset tend to avoid difficult challenges because they fear failure. They think it will expose them as inadequate. So they are reluctant to take risks. They play it safe. When do people with the fixed mindset thrive? "When things are safely within their grasp. If things get too challenging . . . they lose interest."

People with the growth mindset react differently. "They don't just seek challenge, they thrive on it. The bigger the challenge, the more they stretch."

Parents can do great damage, Dweck says, when they tell their children they are gifted, clever, talented. This encourages the child to believe that he or she has a fixed quantum of ability. This in turn discourages them from risking failure. Such children often grow up to say things like, "I feel that my parents won't value me if I'm not as successful as they would like."

Parents who want to help their children should, she says, praise them not for their ability but for their effort, their willingness to try hard even if they fail. A great basketball coach used to say to his players, "You may be outscored, but you will never lose." If they gave of their best, they might lose the game but they would gain and grow. They would be winners in the long run.

The person with a fixed mindset lives with the constant fear of failure. Those with a growth mindset don't think in terms of failing at all.

Apply this logic to the spies and we see something fascinating. The Torah describes them in these words:

“All were all leading men among the Israelites.”

Num. 13:3

They were people with reputations to guard. Others had high expectations of them. They were princes, leaders, men of renown. If Dweck is right, people laden with expectations tend to be risk-averse. They do not want to be seen to fail. That may be why they came back and said, in effect: We cannot win against the Canaanites. Therefore, we should not even try.

There were two exceptions, Caleb and Joshua. Caleb came from the tribe of Judah, and Judah, we learn in the book of Bereishit, was the first *ba'al teshuvah*. Early in life he had been the one who proposed selling Joseph into slavery. But he matured. He was taught a lesson by his daughter-in-law, Tamar. He confessed, “She is more righteous than I am.” That experience seems to have changed his life. Later, when the Viceroy of Egypt (Joseph, not yet recognised by the brothers) threatens to hold Benjamin as a prisoner, Judah offers to spend his life as a slave so that his brother can go free. Judah is the clearest example in Bereishit of someone who takes adversity as a learning experience rather than as failure. In Dweck's terminology, he had a growth mindset. Evidently he handed on this trait to his descendants, Caleb among them.

As for Joshua, the text tells us specifically in the story of the spies that Moses had changed his name. Originally he was called Hoshea, but Moses added a letter to his name (see Num. 13:16). A change of name always implies a change of character or calling. Abram became Abraham. Jacob became Israel. When our name changes, says Maimonides, it is as if we or someone else were saying “You are not the same person as you were before” (*Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance 2:4*).

Anyone who has experienced a name-change has been inducted into a growth mindset.

People with the growth mindset do not fear failure. They relish challenges. They know that if they fail, they will try again until they succeed. It cannot be coincidence that the two people among the

spies who had the growth mindset were also the two who were unafraid of the risks and trials of conquering the land. Nor can it be accidental that the ten others, all of whom carried the burden of people's expectations (as leaders, princes, men of high rank) were reluctant to do so.

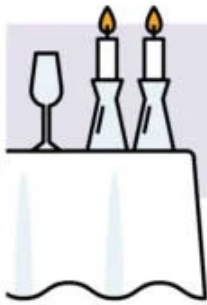
If this analysis is correct, the story of the spies holds a significant message for us. God does not ask us never to fail. He asks of us that we give of our best. He lifts us when we fall and forgives us when we fail. It is this that gives us the courage to take risks. That is what Joshua and Caleb knew, one through his name change, the other through the experience of his ancestor Judah.

Hence the paradoxical but deeply liberating truth: Fear of failure causes us to fail. It is the willingness to fail that allows us to succeed.

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[1] Carol S. Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, Ballantine Books, 2016.

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## Around the Shabbat Table

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER

1. Do you think Moses had a fixed mindset or a growth mindset?
2. If your name were to be changed to reflect or encourage growth, what would your new name be?
3. Should we fear a fear of failure?