

June 20, 2008

Shabbat Shalom!

One of the most curious and surprising aspects of the Torah reading for this week is captured in a comment included in the Conservative movement's Torah commentary, Eitz Hayyim. Sh'lach L'cha recounts the journey of 12 scouts, each representing one of the tribes of Israel, into the land of Canaan to see what it was like. Two scouts – Caleb and Joshua – returned to the people with excitement and optimism, but the other 10 scouts brought back a message of apprehension and despair, telling the people that they should remain where they are, short of their goal.

In Chapter 14, verse 27 of Numbers, the 10 scouts who gave the negative majority report were called an “eidah ra'ah,” an “evil community.” The rabbis of Jewish tradition looked at this verse and deduced that ten must be just enough for a group of people to be called a “community.” This was one of the very verses the rabbis cited when they ruled that the minimum number is TEN for a quorum for a worship service (which we know as a minyan, meaning “counting”). How strange that the rabbis would take this negative reference as a basis for such a standard, given that the pessimism of the 10 scouts was so great that it was determined that the people weren't yet ready to enter their promised land!

Yet, there are important lessons to learn from the approach of the rabbis to this passage. First, they took something negative and turned it towards a positive purpose. The total number of the scouts in the negative majority – ten - became the prescribed minimum amount for future gatherings of Jews who would recite prayers that would express praise, thanks, and hope (instead of voicing pessimism and despair). More important, this was the rabbis' way of telling us that ten people out of hundreds of thousands can make a difference, for better or for worse. What they hoped, of course, was that gatherings of ten-plus would seek to change the world for the better and enable each individual to grow and to take his or her community responsibility seriously.

In our attitudes, our declarations, and in our leadership, let us remember that, through what we do and through the faith we have in ourselves as individuals and as a group, we can sustain or, if necessary, restore, confidence and hope for ourselves, our community and even for the world.

**-- L'shalom,
Rabbi Larry K.**