

# THE PULL OF SOCIETY AND SOCIAL PRESSURE

*by Rabbi Yissocher Frand*

## Parshas Shlach

### The Pull of Society and Social Pressure

Parshas Sh'lach contains a "low water mark" in the history of the Jewish people - the incident of the Meraglim [Spies], the nation's balking at entering the Promised Land, and the Divine punishment that followed these events. The event was an unmitigated disaster. Because of the needless crying on the night the spies returned (the eve of the Ninth of Av), that date was set aside for crying throughout the generations.

The Torah says that there were two spies that did not follow in the path of the others - Kalev and Yehoshua. Chazal make a point of telling us that these two spies had special help in being able to stand up to the rest of the spies. Yehoshua was given a special name change by Moshe (from Hoshea to Ye-hoshua) indicating a prayer (may G-d (Yud-Hey) save you (Hoshea) from the counsel of the spies. Moshe anticipated through Divine Inspiration that Yehoshua would need extra protection to stand up to the evil report of his fellow spies. Similarly, Chazal say that Kalev went to the grave of the Patriarchs in Chevron and prayed for Divine Assistance. This prayer is what gave him the fortitude to withstand the "counsel of the spies".

This is testimony to that which the Rambam says [Hilchos Deos 6:1] (and that which is a sociological fact), namely "a person's nature is to be drawn in his opinions and his actions after his friends and companions." Man is the only creature who speaks. Man is a social animal who must interact, and in order to interact it is necessary for him to communicate. In order to communicate, man was given a form of intelligent speech. The downside of this trait is that man is greatly influenced by the speech and communication he receives from others. "Therefore," the Rambam continues, "man must dwell amongst righteous and wise individuals so that he may learn from their actions and distance himself from the wicked who walk in the ways of darkness so that he not learn from their ways..." In short, the Rambam teaches that a person must be exceedingly careful regarding the company he keeps. Ultimately, a person will become who his neighbors and friends are. If the friends and neighbors are looking out for spiritual growth, then he too will grow spiritually. If the reverse is true, then the outcome will be reversed as well.

Therefore, Kalev and Yehoshua needed special Divine Assistance (s'yata d'shmaya) to stand up to the other spies. Without s'yata d'shmaya, they would have been swept away by what the other spies reported.

Sociological studies have been done where 20 people are in a room and 19 of the participants are "in" on the study and they are told to answer a question in a patently false way (e.g. - the orange is blue). Invariably, the 20th person, who is the actual subject of the study, when asked to answer the same question, answers it in a way that is absurd, just to make his answer correspond with that of everyone else in the room. So profound is the influence of society that something can be black and white and a person will change his response just to conform to everyone else!

All anyone needs to do is step out into the street in order to witness the profound influence of society. We have a cleaning lady who comes once a week to clean the house. My wife recently noticed that she now has a tattoo on her ankle. When I was growing up, sailors had tattoos. No one else had tattoos. It was unheard of for a woman to have a tattoo. Getting tattooed is a painful procedure.

My wife asked the cleaning lady why she decided to get a tattoo. She responded, "Because all my friends have tattoos." My wife has been teaching in Bais Yaakov for over 20 years now. In previous years, when my wife taught the story of Eliezer and Rivka and she mentioned that Eliezer brought nose-rings, the girls in the class did not understand what nose-rings were. "Who wears nose-rings these days?" Today, if you go out into the street you see them. It is hard to even look at it, it's so ugly. If a law was passed that said "Everyone must have their noses pierced" or "their lips pierced" the civil liberties groups would protest that this is cruel and unusual punishment. But if society suddenly decides that they want their noses pierced, their lips pierced, and worse, then everyone starts doing it! The fact that it looks disgusting and is painful and is crazy is irrelevant. "The nature of man is to be drawn in his thoughts and actions after his companions." Such is the unbelievably profound pull of society on human beings.

This is precisely why the Rambam counsels us to dwell amongst the righteous and to seek counsel amongst the wise. We must be particularly careful who our friends are and we must be even more particularly careful about who our children's friends are. Adults are somewhat less susceptible to the pressures of society, but for children -- especially teenagers and adolescents -- the influence of their environment is all that counts. It is particularly important to ensure -- to whatever extent possible -- that our children's friends are righteous and wise.

### **Sarai's Yud Rightfully Went to Yehoshua**

Chazal say that the letter Yud added onto the name of Hoshea came from the name Sarai (Sin Reish Yud) that was changed to Sarah (Sin Reish Hay). This Yud was floating in a state of suspended animation from the time of the Matriarch Sarah to the time of Yehoshua. Was there not an

opportunity in those hundreds of intervening years to do something with this poor little letter?

Rav Zalman Sorotzkin, in his Oznayim L'Torah, offers a beautiful insight. Rav Sorotzkin points out a strong connection between Sarah and Yehoshua. Sarai was barren and unable to have children. It was only after the name change that her "mazel" changed and she became "a new person" who was able to have a son. Who was that son? Yitzchak.

When Yitzchak and Yishmael were growing up and they both stood in line to inherit Avraham Avinu, it was Sarah who insisted "This son of the handmaid will not inherit with my son, Yitzchak." [Bereishis 21:10] It was Sarah who ultimately saw to it that the descendants of Yitzchak rather than the descendants of Yishmael should get the Land of Israel.

Yehoshua was the one who brought us into the Land of Israel. It was he who actualized the inheritance that the Matriarch Sarah enabled. It is therefore fitting that the Yud that came from Sarah's previous name (Sarai) now be passed on to Yehoshua, who would bring to fruition the inheritance made possible by the new identity of the Matriarch Sarah, mother of Yitzchak.

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