

Going Against the Majority

In a democratic country, majority rules. But does it always?

Majority rules.

In every democratic country, the majority rules. In every parliamentary or congressional vote, the majority rules. In every court decision, the majority rules.

The concept of majority rules is found in Torah as well, as emphasized in the famous Talmudic story of “Achnai’s Oven.”

The story goes that there was a certain type of earthenware oven, and the Sages in Yavneh, a capital city of Jewish scholarship in the Talmudic Era, were having a dispute over whether this oven could become tamei, or ritually impure.

Rabbi Eliezer HaGadol (Rabbi Eliezer the Great) held that it was pure. But the Sages all opposed him, holding that it could become impure.

Rabbi Eliezer tried to convince the Sages that his was the correct view, but they did not accept his opinion. All the explanations he provided were not accepted—so Rabbi Eliezer tried to prove his correctness by performing miracles. He said to them, “If the law is according to me, a carob shall prove it!” And the carob tree literally moved from point A to point B. But the Sages said to him, “You can’t bring a proof from a carob.”

He said to them, “If the law is according to me, a brook of water

shall prove it!” And the brook of water right there reversed course and started miraculously flowing backwards. Said the Sages to him, “You can’t bring a proof from a water brook.”

Again, Rabbi Eliezer said to them, “If the law is according to me, from Heaven they shall prove it!” And a Heavenly Voice emerged and said, “What do you have against Rabbi Eliezer? The law always follows his opinion!” Rabbi Yehoshua rose to his feet and said, “The Torah is not in Heaven... for it was already written in the Torah at Mt. Sinai, *‘Acharei rabim l’hatos’* (after the majority shall you lean)” —meaning, once the Torah has been given, Torah law follows the majority, not Heavenly Voice or miracles.

But Rabbi Eliezer did not want to submit his opinion to that of the majority and the Sages had him removed from the study hall. He went back to his home in the city of Lod, and there he remained alone until the end of his life. (Talmud, Bava Basra 59b.)

Clearly, in Judaism, we follow the majority.

The Spy Majority

And that brings us to this week’s Torah portion of Shlach.

In this week’s Parshah, Moshe Rabbeinu sends 12 spies to go check out the Holy Land. Are the people who live there strong or weak? Are they few or many? Is the soil good? And so on.

After 40 days, the spies come back, and two of them, Yehoshua and Kaleiv, express their opinion by saying, “Let us go up and we shall inherit it!” The Jewish Nation can conquer the Land.

But the remaining ten spies said, “We cannot go up... because they are too strong for us.”

The question arises: If the rule is that you follow the majority, the Jewish Nation should have listened to the majority opinion saying that we can't go up to this land. If so, they did the right thing at the time by listening to the majority of the spies. So why did G-d punish them?

A Majority of Fools

There is a story told of Rabbi Yonason Eibeshutz, the chief rabbi of Prague 250 years ago who was famous for his brilliant wit and his debates with priests. The story goes that a priest once asked him, “Doesn't it say in your Torah, '*Acharei rabim l'hatos*'? Since we are the majority, why don't you exchange your faith for ours?”

But while the rabbi and the priest were still walking in the street, the rabbi stopped and stared at the sky in wonder. The priest asked him, “What are you looking for up there?” The rabbi answered, “I see a partial solar eclipse right now!” The priest was embarrassed to admit that he didn't see anything of the sort, so he made it seem like he, too, saw something in the sky.

Passersby who saw the rabbi and the priest standing in the street looking up at the sky stopped to ask, “What are they looking at?” So, the priest told them, “There's a solar eclipse happening right now!” All the people, one by one, started looking and convincing themselves that they, too, saw something different about the sun today. Soon a huge crowd

had built up, all looking up and pointing at the sky, with each person saying to the next, “Look over there! You’ll see it!”

At that point, the rabbi turned to the priest and said, “The truth is that I didn’t see anything.” The priest replied, “I also didn’t see anything, but I was embarrassed to admit the truth.”

The rabbi said to him, “You see this huge crowd standing here acting as if it sees something that we both know is false? This is not the majority the Torah intended when it said, *‘Acharei rabim l’hatos.’*”

A Band of Sinners

This explanation can be found as far back as the Talmud.

The Talmud tells us about Chizkiyahu, King of Judah, during whose reign Sancheiriv, King of Ashur came along at the head of a mighty army and laid siege to Jerusalem to conquer the city.

The people of Jerusalem were divided between two opinions. King Chizkiyahu argued that it was forbidden to submit to the king of Ashur and that they needed to go to war against him, but Shevna, a top minister in his court, argued that they needed to submit to Sancheiriv. Not only that, but Shevna even sent a letter via an arrow to Sancheiriv in which he expressed his own submission and blamed any immediate war on his own king.

It would be one thing if it was just Shevna. The problem, however, was that Shevna had 130,000 supporters and King Chizkiyahu himself only had 110,000 supporters. As the Talmud has it, King Chizkiyahu worried that *“dilma nitiya daitei*

d’Kudsha Brich Hu b’sar rubei?” —“Maybe G-d’s opinion is leaning towards the majority?” And if so, that would mean that he, too, would need to accept the ruling of the majority and compromise the political and spiritual independence of the Jewish Nation.

So G-d sent the Prophet Yeshayahu to King Chizkiyahu, who said to him that they were “a band of sinners, and a band of sinners doesn’t count.”

In other words, if it is something against G-d or against humanity, even if the majority argue for it, then it has no force — “a band of sinners doesn’t count” (Talmud, Sanhedrin 26a).

Even in recent generations, there were people who used this argument. After the Holocaust, at the Nuremberg trials, some of the Nazis argued that since the Germans had elected Hitler in a free, fair and democratic election by a majority, everything that happened had been the will of the majority—and the Allies had no right to raise any moral objections.

Win Your War

And so, we come back to our Parshah.

The story of the Miraglim, the Spies, teaches us that G-d Himself doesn’t necessarily follow the majority. On the contrary—sometimes it is precisely the minority that correctly wishes to follow G-d’s Will.

And we Jews, my friends, have always been that minority throughout our history.

As Jews, we have always been the minority — *“atem hame’at mikol ha’amim.”* You are the least of all nations. And yet, we have never been impressed or intimidated by the majority opinion around us. In the United Nations, and in the Middle East, Israel is not only a minority but also alone—and yet, the truth is with the Nation of Israel.

In the Rebbe’s words, when it comes to core matters of Judaism itself, we don’t calculate by majority and minority. The first Jew, Avraham Avinu (our Patriarch Avraham), was called “Avraham Ha’ivri” because “the entire world was on one eiver [side] and he was on the other eiver,” and he “opened the channel” for every Jew throughout all generations. (Hisvaduyos, Tamuz 13, 5712, Toras Menachem Vol. VI, pg. 65.)

Every person, in his own personal life, finds himself many times in the minority. Every time you want to add a new mitzvah, you’re immediately in the minority—everyone tells you, “What’s this? You suddenly became religious?!” Your parents, your friends—they’re all on one side, and you’re there standing alone like King Chizkiyahu. But deep within your heart you know that the truth is with you, and that G-d is with you.

The lesson from this week’s Parsha is to not allow yourself to be intimidated or impressed by anything. And in the end, everyone respects a person who stands on his or her principles. He is the one who “wins the war.”