

# Perception vs reality through the story of the 12 spies

*Ten of the spies stunned Moses and defected to the pro-Egypt camp*

**B**efore delving into analysis of the story of the 12 spies, one needs to comprehend two key aspects of the environment: the pro-Egypt sentiment, and the easily manipulated public opinion.

## Pro-Egypt sentiments awakened

As travel from Sinai began, the quest to return to Egypt reemerged. The previous time such calls to return to Egypt were made – a year prior, during the travel from Egypt to Sinai – it was about Egypt being the lesser of two evils (“It is better for us to serve Egypt than to die in the desert”). Now the campaign has a more appealing message – life in Egypt is good: “We remember the fishery, which we eat in Egypt for free; the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlic.” Not only are they served a fruits-de-mer platter in Egypt, but it is free!

The pro-Egypt messaging did not end with praising life in Egypt. As we are familiar from modern-day public relations campaigns, it also trashes the alternative – the manna. It then resorts to the good old argument of calamity: The manna is not just displeasing but also dries the soul: “But now our soul is dried away; there is nothing at all; we have nothing but manna to look to.”

The protest movement seems to be effective. God agrees to provide meat for a full month! (Its consumption turned out to be fatal.) This, along with Moses ceding power to a council of 70 elders, is sufficient to placate the masses for now. Moreover, an unexpected external threat that suddenly emerged (Miriam’s leprosy) united the nation. And so, while the core issue of “to Egypt or to Israel” is unresolved, this round was successfully “shoved under the rug.” This allows the completion of travel to Kadesh. Once in Kadesh, Moses is ready to execute a plan to deal with the pro-Egypt opposition!

## Easily manipulated public opinion

The second component of the environment that impacts the dispatching of the 12 spies is the apparent high susceptibility of the Israelites to being influenced.

For months, the nation has been in unison with God and Moses, building the Tabernacle impeccably to God’s specifications, over-donating, engaging in a 12-day inauguration ceremony and beginning the orderly journey toward the Promised Land.

While opposition awakens as travel begins, the Torah emphasizes that this opposition was merely on the

fringe. The fire that was meant to counter the ill-talkers was just at the outskirts of the camp, and the “lusting” occurred merely among the fringe multitude (*asafsuf*).

The core of the nation, one would think, is still in high morale, unaffected by the now two attempts by the pro-Egypt fringe to demoralize them. But this was not the case. As the Torah explains, that fringe was able to influence the rest of the nation: “And the multitude that was among them fell a lusting; and the children of Israel also wept on their part, and said: ‘Would that we were given flesh to eat!’”

How can a small group of people sway public opinion so rapidly from one extreme to another?

The answer was provided by Theodor Herzl. In 1887, Herzl wrote a seemingly innocuous short story about a talent agent (“impressor” or “promoter”) who turned an unattractive mediocre singer into the star of Europe, using PR techniques such as paying people to storm the box office ahead of her performance. “The fools just follow the masses with closed eyes... From a piece of wood, I created a diva.” Herzl, through the protagonist, explains just how easily public opinions can be swayed: “Next time someone praises a work of art, the spirit of a man, or the beauty of a woman, check carefully who is the speaker: Is he a fool or a promoter?”

In the decade that followed, Herzl carefully studied the strategies of a real-life promoter: Otto von Bismarck, who unified Germany. “And out of what was this unification created? Out of ribbons, flags, songs, speech,” Herzl wrote in 1895.

So if a promoter can turn a mediocre singer into a star, and if Bismarck can turn a collection of principalities and individuals into an empire, it is no surprise that a group on the fringe can turn an entire nation to crave the cuisine of Egypt.

Moses seemingly learns lessons from the pro-Egypt opposition. Internalizing the importance of public perception, he sends a delegation of 12 opinion leaders, “heads of the sons of Israel,” to the Promised Land and tasks them with a clear mandate: “Strengthen.”

The 12 presidents were to come back with fruit of the land. Praising the Promised Land would strengthen the nation, who would proceed toward Israel.

But that is not what happened. Ten of the 12 spies stunned Moses and defected to the pro-Egypt camp, talking ill about the land. In doing so, putting an end to that generation’s quest to come home to the Land of Israel. It would take another 38 years for their descendants to do so.



PRESIDENT ZALMAN SHAZAR (R) (author of the poem ‘Where Are You, Caleb?’) meets with German chancellor Konrad Adenauer (later successor of Otto von Bismarck) in Jerusalem, 1966. (Wikimedia Commons)

## Perception trumps reality

Indeed, perception created by public relations campaigns often defeats reality. As discussed in the *Magazine*, when the high-speed train between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv was launched in 2018, an aggressive media campaign instilled broad public perception that trains get stuck in tunnels, often canceled and arrive late. In spite of a stunning on-time record of over 95%, one could not convince a person in Tel Aviv that I took the train from Jerusalem and it worked! (see *Magazine* article: The Jerusalem fast-train vs the powerful media, May 2019).

Just as the perception created by the promoter in Herzl’s story defeated the reality of a mediocre singer; just as the perception of the glamorous life of fruits-de-mer cuisine in Egypt defeated the reality of “iron plant” enslavement, so did the perception created by the 10 spies of “a land eating its inhabitants” defeat the reality stated by Joshua and Caleb: “The land is very very good.”

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## What went wrong?

Is it possible that Moses underestimated the depth of the pro-Egypt energies? Was he surprised that it engulfed even the elite (presidents)? Was the replacement of seasoned presidents with new ones that occurred just prior to the dispatching of the spies a contributing factor? Were the new presidents more vulnerable to public pressure? (See upcoming article).

Similarly, did Joshua and Caleb, the two loyal spies, underestimate the anger that would be directed toward them – not just boycotts and social shaming, but violence and even an assassination attempt. Or, as can be ascertained from the biblical story, they fully understood the price they would pay, and chose to fight for their cause against the powerful stream of public opinion?

An attempt to answer these questions was made over 3,000 years later, by the third president of the renewed State of Israel, Zalman Shazar. He wrote a poem titled “Where Are you, Caleb?” (“*Ayeka Kalev?*”): “At times of confusion and dispute, brotherly quarrel in the camp... I observe and wonder, and my heart yells: Where are you, Caleb?”