

Kalev's Shining Hour

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Parashat Shelach

An intriguing minor character¹ in the Bible.

Kalev ben Yefuna is a man of mystery. The purpose of his entire life is defined by his brief address to the Jewish people² on a single portentous day in biblical history.³

Kalev first comes to our attention when he is listed as the tribe of Yehuda's representative on the ill-fated spy mission (BaMidbar 13:6), charged with investigating the land of Israel and reporting back to the Jewish people prior to their crossing the Jordan (13:2, 17-20). In contrast to Yehoshua bin Nun, who has already been presented by the Tora as Moshe's military expert,⁴ devoted student,⁵ and even the recipient of a special blessing from Moshe prior to the departure of the spies (13:16), all sufficient reasons for us to assume that Yehoshua will be unambiguously supportive of whatever his teacher desires vis-à-vis the plan to conquer Canaan, we are not given any comparable background information about Kalev. Based upon a simple reading of the Tora text,^{6 7} there is no way for us to determine Kalev's religious and political positions.

¹ I define biblical "minor" characters by the number of verses that are devoted to them in the biblical text, specifically ten verses or less. Such figures would then include: Hevel (8 verses—but not his brother Kayin who appears in 16 verses); Lamech (10 verses), Chanoch II (6 verses); Shem (10 verses); the "refugee" who informs Avraham that Lot had been captured (1 verse); the individual who directs Yosef to where his brothers are located (1 verse), etc. In a similar vein, Kalev appears explicitly in only 10 verses:

BaMidbar 13:6, 30; 14:6, 24, 30, 38; 26:65; 32:12; 34:19; Devarim 1:26.

² Naturally, Kalev said and did more throughout his life than the few lines attributed to him in BaMidbar 13:30 and 14:7-9. However, the Tora indicates to the reader that this is all that matters "LeDorot" (for eternity), this individual's reputation and significant lifelong accomplishment being reflected in these brief lines.

³ A poignant presentation of the idea that an entire lifetime can be justified or nullified by a single isolated action appears in Midrash Chadash (quoted by Tora Shleima on Parashat Shelach, p. 81, fn. 208) "In an instant an individual can lose his world, and in an instant an individual can earn his world. Bilaam lost his world in an instant due to the advice that he offered (BaMidbar 31:16); and Kalev acquired his world in an instant, as it is said, (14:24) "And my servant Kalev, since there was a different spirit within him," an apparent reference to 13:30.

⁴ Shemot 17:9-13.

⁵ Shemot 33:11.

⁶ According to a Rabbinic interpretation based upon Sota 11b's understanding of the genealogy listed in Divrei HaYamim I 2:19 (RaShI on 17:10 and 24:14 refers to this position of the Rabbis), where Kalev is recorded to have married "Efrat" and subsequently fathered Chur, Kalev's personality and courage become more understandable. Not only is Chur a notable character in stories immediately following the Exodus from Egypt, i.e., in the war against Amalek (Shemot 17:10, 12) as well as being left in charge of the encampment along with Aharon (24:14) when Moshe ascends Sinai for the first forty day period in order to receive the commandments that are in addition to the Ten Commandments that were publicly revealed (19:1 ff.), but according to Sanhedrin 7a, he dies heroically trying to prevent the people from fabricating and worshipping the Golden Calf. (In order to account for why such an important personality disappears from the text after the significant roles that he is given up until this point, the Rabbis surmise that he met his end during the events recorded in Shemot 32. Particularly when the text states that Aharon "saw" something (32:5) that influenced him not to stand in the way of the idolaters, the Rabbis assert that he

Kalev finally takes a public position.

It is only the next time that Kalev is mentioned explicitly by name,⁸ in 13:30 that his allegiance to God and Moshe first become apparent. At this point in the narrative, ten of the spies have just questioned not only the ability of the Jewish people, but also, implicitly, God's Competence, to conquer Canaan's present inhabitants. While the other spies agreed that the land is flowing with milk and honey, as well as filled with magnificent produce (13:27), nevertheless they cautioned that the Canaanites are intimidatingly strong and live in fortified cities (13:28-9). The Tora then recounts how Kalev immediately steps forward, commands the people's attention, and delivers a ringing affirmation of the Divine Promise: (13:30) "...Let us go up now and possess the land, for we can conquer it." This is the single time that Kalev is listed as doing something by himself, without anyone else's support. The next and final time that Kalev is described in the Tora as taking any sort of action, is when he together with Yehoshua, in response to the Jewish people's crying and complaining about the leadership of HaShem as well as that of Moshe and Aharon due to the pessimistic report of the other ten spies (14:1-4), tear their clothes in despair and try one last time to turn the tide of public sentiment:

BaMidbar14:7-9

...the land that we spied out is extremely good. If God is positively Disposed towards us, and Brings us to this land, and Intends to Give us a land flowing with milk and honey, don't rebel against HaShem, and don't be frightened of the people who currently live in the land, for they are our "bread", their shadow of

saw Chur murdered and was concerned that he would meet a similar fate were he too to stand in the people's way.) The resolve of a Chur most certainly parallels the tough-minded stance that Kalev assumes with regard to the Meraglim. Furthermore, Sota 11b posits that "Efrat" was another name for Miriam, Moshe and Aharon's sister. In addition to Miriam's own tenacious qualities and refusal to be intimidated by the likes of Amram, Pharoah, and Moshe, if Kalev was in fact Moshe's brother-in-law, then his loyalty to the Divine Plan suddenly becomes more comprehensible.

It seems to me, however, that if we attribute his action to whom he was related to, the ethical lesson is weakened, if not totally compromised. Just as the Midrash in Yalkut Shimoni #743 (on BaMidbar 13, Parshat Shelach) explains that the people were not interested in hearing from Yehoshua, because due to his close connection to Moshe, they already knew ahead of time what he was going to say, i.e., that they should listen to God's Instructions and proceed to conquer Canaan, if Kalev was Miriam's husband, wouldn't the same thing be true?

⁷ Intriguingly, RaShI on 13:23 suggests that the other spies might have been aware of Kalev's stance as a result of how the fruits were carried back from Canaan. The commentator contends that neither Yehoshua nor Kalev carried anything, because they realized that the only reason why the other spies were bringing these giant sized examples was to legitimize the claim that everything in Canaan was "supersized" and therefore impossible to conquer. On the other hand, I suppose that Kalev could have given some excuse as to why he did not want to bring back fruit so that the suspicions of the others would not have been aroused.

⁸ Commentators interpret an earlier verse—BaMidbar 13:22— as indicating something else that Kalev may have uniquely done, i.e., prayed in Chevron at the graves of the founders of the Jewish people for guidance as to how to properly proceed. However, his name is omitted from the verse in question, therefore shrouding the event in anonymity, and therefore cannot serve as the immediate explanation for Kalev's uniqueness. On the other hand, when there appears to be no reasonable alternative that would provide a reproducible lesson, it is ultimately cited as the key to understanding Kalev and his independence. See the discussion of the second half of 13:22 in the latter portion of the essay.

protection is removed from them. HaShem Is with us and therefore do not be afraid.

Kalev and Yehoshua's words endorsing HaShem's Plan were apparently so opposed to general public sentiment, that the next verse describes how these two men are almost stoned by the people, who deeply disagree with their point of view (14:10).

Factors contributing to Kalev's not being swayed by the majority report.

While each of the twelve men chosen for the intelligence-gathering mission must have been individuals of distinction and leadership capabilities⁹ if they merited being selected by their fellow tribesmen to represent general tribal interests in spying out Canaan, it is intriguing to consider how and why Kalev returned with such a fundamentally different impression than everyone else, with the obvious exception of Yehoshua. In 14:24, Kalev is singled out by God—it is interesting that Yehoshua is not similarly mentioned¹⁰ as having a “different spirit and followed Me fully”. While Kalev saw the same inhabitants and fortified cities that the others did, instead of being frightened and giving up hope of conquering the land, he stayed confident and optimistic in terms of the Divine Promise coming to fruition. Naturally it is possible to attribute this difference in perspective to innate personality traits, e.g., being an optimist rather than a pessimist, and unique deeply held religious beliefs, i.e., Emuna Temima that does not allow God's Word to ever be doubted. But then there would be nothing for someone who does not share such inclinations or wholehearted faith to learn from Kalev's example. The only conclusion available to the reader would be that either a person is endowed with a religious, trusting, confident orientation similar to that of Kalev, or one is not. Realizing the importance of allowing Kalev to serve as a paradigm for Jews down through the ages, biblical commentators identify a single action undertaken by him that they deem responsible for his courageous defiance of popular sentiment, so that not only can he be better understood as a historical figure, but his religious perspective can on some level be replicated by those reflecting upon his example.

What Kalev might have done in order to try to stay true to his mission.

The Rabbinic source that is universally cited by commentators such as RaShI, RaShBaM, Rabbeinu Bachaye, Chizkuni, and Emek Davar is Rava's interpretation in Sota 34b of the first half of BaMidbar 13:22. “VaYa'alu BaNegev VaYavo Ad Chevron...” (And THEY went up through the south and HE came to Chevron).

⁹ Ibn Ezra on 13:2 “And the sense of ‘Anashim’ (men) is that these individuals were well-known as men of might and courage...”

¹⁰ The omission of Yehoshua is explained in the following manner by some of the commentators:

a) Ibn Ezra—since only Kalev quieted the people as the initial response to the other spies' negative report, he is singled out.

b) RaMBaM—Kalev's reward is being mentioned at this point. Since that reward is unique to him, and Yehoshua will be rewarded in a different manner, only Kalev is mentioned.

c) Chizkuni, Tosefet Beracha—Since according to Eiruvin 63a, Yehoshua did not have children, and therefore it would neither be relevant nor considerate to discuss what their offspring would inherit.

d) Ohr HaChayim—Whereas Yehoshua was immune to the influence of the other spies as a result of the special blessing that Moshe imparted to him in 13:16, Kalev had to rely on his inner, personal resources to make the right decision. Therefore it can be said more appropriately of him that he possessed “a different spirit”.

It should have said, “And THEY came to Chevron”! Rava said: This comes to teach that Kalev separated himself from the plotting of the spies, and he went and prostrated himself on the graves of the Forefathers. He said to them, “My Fathers, ask for mercy on my behalf that I be saved from the plotting of the spies...

Although the text of 13:22 relies on a third person masculine pronoun (“And He came”), which in and of itself hardly appears to clearly refer to any particular individual’s specific course of action, let alone that of Kalev, Rava deduces from Devarim 1:36, wherein Moshe instructs the people that once they enter the land, Kalev is to be given the land that he has “walked upon”, an area specified in Yehoshua 14:13 and Shoftim 1:20 as Chevron, that the individual being discussed in BaMidbar is Kalev.

What may have caused Kalev to wish to engage in such an action?

How is this action on Kalev’s part to be understood as the catalyst that allowed him to march to a different drummer and resist following the majority sentiment of the spies? If we assume that Kalev intended from the outset to be assigned to spy out this specific area so that he could visit the Ma’arat HaMachpeila,¹¹ it might suggest that he had a strong sense of Jewish history and destiny. Rather than exclusively concerning himself with short term issues of safety and military strategy, Kalev was moved by the longer view of the Divine Covenant, originally conveyed to Avraham in Beraishit 15:18-21, and subsequently transferred first to Yitzhak (28:4)¹² and then Yaakov (28:13; 48:4). MaHaRShA on Sota 34b formulates Kalev’s competing considerations in the following manner:

The concept of “a different spirit” suggests the idea that there are two spirits within man, in accordance with (Kohelet 3:21) “Who knows concerning the spirit of man that rises to the Heavens and the spirit of the animal that descends downwards to the earth?” The life-giving force is spirit that man and animal both have, but the spirit that is different, that separates man from animals, is the soul. Therefore, HaShem Says concerning Kalev, that he did not follow his animalistic spirit as did his colleagues, the other spies, but rather he allowed himself to be influenced by the “different spirit”, i.e., the soul, and therefore followed HaShem fully...

Iyun Yaakov, another commentary on Sota 34b, puts it slightly differently, resorting to a more metaphysical, as opposed to psychological, approach:

Although the body decomposes, and the dead know nothing¹³
...nevertheless by means of prayer, their spirits hear what is being
conveyed...(the commentator cites Berachot 18b as a support to this

¹¹ See Beraishit 23, particularly verses 1, 17-20.

¹² If Yitzhak bestows the blessing of the land upon Yaakov, it implies that he received such a blessing from Avraham, although no verse explicitly states this.

¹³ Tosafot Sota 34b d.h. Avotai Bikshu Alai Rachamim discusses reconciling such a view with the practice of those who visit graves and pour out their prayers.

view) Therefore this is what is meant by Kalev's possessing a "different spirit", i.e., the spirit of his Forefathers who had passed away, were literally with him and therefore helped him to not be influenced by the plotting of the spies...

Consequently, we perceive the personality of an individual being informed neither by current perspectives or sentiments, nor by the powerful direct influence of a particular teacher, but rather by tradition and history. The Avot "spoke" to Kalev, and their prophecies and sacrifices resonated within him in a manner that led to his own courageous stand, however fleeting and momentary.

"Ikar Chaser Min HaSefer", i.e., why is the understanding of 13:30 left to become clear only in retrospect?

Yet the question remains: if it is religiously significant to convey this particular piece of information concerning Kalev prior to his publicly identifying himself as a supporter of HaShem, Moshe and Yehoshua in BaMidbar 13:30, why isn't it made clear that he was the one spying out Chevron and thereby availed himself of the opportunity to seek inspiration from the burial site of the founders of the Jewish people?¹⁴ Is the concealment of Kalev's name nothing more than a literary device, so that 13:30 will not only be surprising to the rest of the Jewish people who did not suspect that Kalev would be sympathetic to the Divine Cause, but also to the reader? Or is there some other reason for the Tora's ambiguity in this matter? What do you think?

Universalizing Rava's approach to Kalev.

Nevertheless, the idea that we should familiarize ourselves with our Jewish nation's past, its dreams and promises, goal and aspirations, in order to draw personal courage and resolve so that we are able to pursue unpopular courses of action if need be, emerges clearly from Rava's treatment of Kalev. All religiously observant individuals have to be able to independently and forthrightly decide whether what general society, and for that matter, even Jewish society, assumes is appropriate behavior, ethical values, and basic beliefs, is proper and acceptable, not on the basis of personal taste and preference, but from the perspective of our traditions and the great personalities who continue to influence us whether they are still with us, or have long ago passed away.

¹⁴ A similar, and even more acute problem in light of its religious significance, exists with regard to the tradition that Avraham was first thrown into a furnace by Nimrod as a result of his refusal to participate in idolatrous rituals, and then saved by God from dying in the flames. There is no clear biblical textual reference to this event, aside from allusions in Beraishit 11:31 and 15:7. Why shouldn't such a powerful example of self-sacrifice and God's Divine Intervention be highlighted in the biblical text? In another context, I have suggested that perhaps there was a concern about presenting martyrdom as an overriding value, possibly leading to an overly ascetic approach to religious observance.