

בִּטְחוֹן עַצְמִי – CULTIVATING THE SPIRITUAL PRACTICE OF SELF-CONFIDENCE

Exploring the high value that Jewish tradition places on *bitachon atzmi* - self-confidence -and being able to trust in one's self and one's judgment. Based on the episode with Calev and the spies when the verse in Numbers 14:24 refers to Calev as possessing a *ruach acheret* - a different spirit. We all have a spark of Calev within us, a unique spirit, the source for cultivating courage and resilience.

1 – The first teaching is from Rav Yaakov Yitzchak Rabinowicz, who lived 1766-1814, known as the “The Holy Jew – *HaYehudi HaKodesh*”, student of the Chozeh of Lublin, who lived in Preshischa, Poland. He stressed that a human being must learn **to listen to oneself**. In this way one could be cognizant of and actively receive the blessings of Heaven.

2 – His successor, Rav Simcha Bunim, who lived 1766-1827, expanded on this idea of learning to listen to oneself by teaching that **if a person knows who one is, then he/she is not frightened by others**, a clear impediment to authentic living. Someone who has a sense of one’s own self doesn’t need to be anybody else. He or she can admire another without wanting to that person.

These two teachings are found in *The Quest for Authenticity: The Thought of R’ Simcha Bunim*, by Michael Rosen, Urim Publications 2008.

3 – Rav Kook, who passed away here in Yerushalayim in 1935, teaches in *Shmoneh Kevatzim*, Section 1, Entry 331, on the importance of *bitachon atzmi* – self-confidence/trust: “A person needs to believe in one’s own life, to believe in both one’s physical strengths and in one’s spiritual and ethical ones. **Believing in one’s own life is a blessing from God**. Conversely, the lack of believing in oneself is a terrible and unbearable curse. When a person believes in one’s spiritual life, **that** individual experiences fulfillment and inner bliss from one’s efforts. This encourages the person to continue growing in feeling spiritually elevated.”

4 - The Piasezner Rebbe, Rav Kalonymous Kalman Shapira, who perished in the *Shoah* in 1943, also known as The *Aish Kodesh*, introduces in his spiritual journal *Tzav V’Ziruz*, in entry 24, a practice **that helps the individual gain greater self- confidence and self-trust**, a resource to add to one’s spiritual tool box: “**Envision yourself** as already the ideal spiritual person you really are. **Just imagine** the greatness of your soul. **Meditate deeply** on this visualization. **Hold these images** in your mind’s eye. **Inevitably you will be aroused to a higher awareness.**” (translated by Yehoshua Starrett in “*To Heal the Soul.*”)

5 – Rav Raz Hartman, contemporary Rabbi in Jerusalem and founder of the congregation “*Va’ani Tefilah*” in Nachlaot offers a profound teaching on trusting in oneself in his article “*Sacred Chutzpah*”, published in 2014, based on *Parshat Shelach* (Numbers, chapters 13 – 15).

He shares his acute observation that “there is something deep-rooted, a fundamental matter, that without it, one’s life journey in general is not able to succeed. And in an astonishing way, among many of us, this is tremendously lacking. In a strange and astounding way, most of the world does not urge the development of this essential principle --- not in one’s education, not among one’s community, and not in one’s life: **self-confidence and trusting in oneself – *bitachon atzmi***. This includes the ability to know that there is something within me of intrinsic value that is of the highest meaning, that my opinions, thoughts and deeds are essential to who I am, that they are important, AT THE VERY LEAST, as much as other peoples’, and this as well includes the strength to step forward in the way that appears to me to be correct, without looking behind me and making sure that everyone else is pleased. All of these are parts of this great matter that is referred to as self-confidence and trusting in oneself, and **one’s very inner life thirsts for it**.

In its deepest depths, its root is faith ---- faith in the Godly Divine light that dwells within the individual. If in fact HaShem did create us, there is **at least** one point within us that knows more about each of us than the world in its entirety. There exists in each soul a new idea, an innovation, and an illumination that the entire world needs and longs for. In order to actually express this potential and to illuminate the world a person must believe in this very point, to know it and to heed it.

This inner trust, this belief in ourselves, is built and is strengthened for most of us when we encounter opposition. In these moments of difficulty and struggle, one’s spiritual courage and inner self-awareness is being tested. As this struggle becomes deeper and more refined one needs to know: when should I heed to the opposition and when not; when to say, ‘I made a mistake, you are right’ and when to know to say ‘better that I am guilty of walking on my own path.’ If we know how to navigate these moments with **a true integration of humility and self-confidence**, we will increasingly grow the inner light that dwells within us --- more and more. **We will know in truth that we can in fact depend on ourselves.**

Rav Raz continues, “A major basis for this teaching is found within *Parshat Shelach* (Numbers, specifically in chapters 14 & 15). In its root, we find in the story of the spies a fundamental argument between Calev and the other spies. The spies said concerning Eretz Yisrael that surely the land is good and special, “but the people are powerful...we are not able to ascend to those people...we were like grasshoppers in our eyes, and so we were in their eyes.” And at that moment they expressed in truth their reality---they perceived themselves as small in their own eyes and projected that onto the Canaanite people. Opposite this voice, where there was in fact a danger to deny the truth within their claim, stood Calev, and he said something simple and to the point, lacking logic and reasoning; **rather only his sense of his inner pristine truth, “...we shall surely ascend and conquer it, for we can surely do it”** (Numbers 13:30). His inner knowledge within self-confidence sustains this fully when he proclaims, “we can surely do it.” The fundamental point, as mentioned

earlier, is in faith --- faith in the aspect of HaShem that is found within us, which nurtures our sense of identity and our inner steadfastness.

This teaching informs us of the difference between blatant insolence and sacred audacity. Within this context, there are two points we can extract from the story of Calev that will shed light on our own paths.

The first point is to give space for the Holy One Blessed Be He by asking God a question. The question is not as much what is it that I want, but rather, what is the voice of HaShem in the matter?

What is being asked of me at this moment? Essentially the individual must increase one's meditation and prayer in order to distinguish and grasp the particular way that connects to and resonates with one's faith in HaShem.

The second point derives from the fact that there are matters that are so fundamental in life, that in truth, **THERE, IN THAT PLACE, it is possible to pay attention ONLY to our inner self-awareness.**

With these important and essential matters in life one's ultimate decision is able to come only from one's heart and soul. **When on the scale stands our very faith,** in these moments one needs tremendous sacred audacity to say, "Here I am unable to ask anyone else, this is the very root of my life."

And as with Calev, this surely requires a *ruach acheret*, a different spirit, as referred to in Numbers 14:24 --- a strong and believing spirit, a spirit of true sacred audacity, accessing and encountering the spirit of HaShem that is within each one of us.

6 – The Piaseczner teaches while incarcerated in the Warsaw Ghetto, in his *Aish Kodesh*, on the same *parsha*, *Parshat Shelach*, in June 1940, that in fact at times, "a person needs to say, 'Yes, all the logic and facts may indeed be true. (Referring to the points that the spies bring up as clear logical reasons against even attempting to settle in the Land of Israel), The people who inhabit the land may be very strong, and their cities well-fortified, and so forth, **but** I still believe in God, who is beyond any boundaries and above all nature." This is why the Piaseczner believes that Calev did not enter into a debate with the other spies, trying to demolish their argument and their reasoning. Rather he spoke his inner true belief in God that he encountered within himself, "We must go forth ---We can surely do it" (Numbers 13:30).

Yiscah is a Jewish educator, spiritual activist and podcaster (*Authentic Jewish Living with Yiscah*) who addresses the spiritual practice of encountering the Divine spark within, the foundation of authentic living. She teaches Jewish meditative practice and spiritual texts at Pardes and at Applied Jewish Spirituality. Yiscah provides as well spiritual mentoring to individuals seeking an awareness of the Divine spark within.

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