

SHELACH LECHA – SPIES AND FAKE NEWS

This portion includes one of the Bible's most tragic events. Our ancestors were right there, at the border of the Promised Land – so close! God advised Moses to choose twelve representatives to go and scout it, which they did for forty days. They returned and gave their report in front of the entire nation, saying it was a good land but that the inhabitants were strong. One of the spies, Caleb, maybe with Joshua at his side, urged the people that they could conquer the natives. The majority responded absolutely not, because they weren't capable. Further they spread rumors, saying that the land devoured its inhabitants, and that the natives were giants! The majority cried that they felt like grasshoppers, so the indigenous people must have seen them as tiny and weak too! The Israelites panicked, lost their will, and God decided that they weren't ready to be a nation. This is why we wandered for forty years, so the Egypt generation could die off – they still had a slave mentality.

Most of the spies had an agenda, and they employed misinformation and fear to achieve their goal. Sound familiar? I believe that this was the first use of FAKE NEWS!! It's plaguing us now even more than it was back then, so much so that it's very hard to know what the truth is, about anything! Author and filmmaker Errol Morris wrote recently that, "What's scary about the present time is that people believe they can assert truth just by screaming louder than others or repeating themselves ... But we all know in our hearts that mere repetition and decibel level is no way to truth." (TIME, 6/11/18)

How do you get to the truth? Our tradition teaches that that truth doesn't belong solely to one individual or group. We value debate and different interpretations because we believe that such striving, when done sincerely, will blaze a path to the truth. Therefore, one must be willing to listen to opposing views - you can't rely on one source of information. Getting to the truth requires investigation, and patience.

In the Talmud we learn that the disciples of two great scholars, Shammai and Hillel, disagreed on almost everything in matters of *halacha* or Jewish Law. Ultimately, a heavenly angel proclaimed: Both these and those are the words of the living God. However, the *halakha* is in accordance with the opinion of Beit Hillel. Why? Three reasons.

First, because they were agreeable, showing restraint when affronted and not engaging in a shouting match. Second, when they taught the *halakha* they would teach both their own statements and the statements of Beit Shammai. And third,

when they formulated their teachings and cited a dispute, they prioritized the statements of Beit Shammai over their own statements, out of respect.

If only the gang of ten would have listened to Caleb and Joshua, maybe things could have been different. Maybe they would have devised a plan satisfactory to all – we will never know. The results of the scare tactics were devastating – they set us back forty years! Today, let's try to be like Hillel. Don't treat your opponent with contempt, rather be respectful and try to find common ground. Shabbat shalom.