

June 17 2017

Parasha Sh'lach L'cha: Cup Half Full

This week we learn about the 12 scouts who were sent to research the Promised Land; the Land we had been marching toward, step after step in desert sand, skin darkened by unforgiving sun.

These scouts were highly esteemed, responsible people, princes in their own right. We are given their names. We are given their pedigrees. We are given the Promised Land questions that Moses asked of them: "What kind of country is it? Are the people strong or weak, few or many? Were the cities fortified or no walls? Trees or not so much? And could you please bring back some fruit?" After forty days, they return to Moses with their report. They all saw the same thing but their reports were very different. Ten argued that the land was impossible to enter the land and two, Joshua and Caleb, were optimistic about the adventure. If all 12 saw the same thing, why the big difference in perspective? Why did one group speak of giants who made them feel like pathetic grasshoppers and the other two Joshua and Caleb offer no such report?

Perhaps it boils down to those who were able to remain optimistic and those who descended into pessimism. Given that **all** Israelites were beaten down by wounds of slavery and weary from wandering in the desert, one would think they would *all* be pessimists. And yet, Joshua and Caleb saw rocks not only as challenges to climb but also as stepping stones to something better. What did these two hold onto to keep them positive?

20th century rabbis Unna and Carlebach spent much of their rabbinic lives studying pessimists and optimists in the Jewish tradition. They based a great deal of their writing on the passage in the Talmud Shabbat 31a that says, “it is incumbent upon people to anticipate redemption.” Meaning that it is a mitzva, a religious obligation, to look forward to things being better. Once belief is in place, things become possible. For example, how could anyone after the horror of World War II envision a tech savvy, modern state of Israel? A place where the nearly dead language of Hebrew would become vibrant? Some did. And thank G-d for the optimists.

Author and wealth manager, Dr. Dennis Kimbro taught, “Life is 10% what happens to us and 90% how we respond to it.” When we see ourselves as involved participants in our lives and not victims tossed about like wind, we are more likely to stay positive.

Rabbi Isak Unan and Rabbi Joseph Carlebach found that the key contrast in pessimists and optimists is how one understands the *role* of human beings in the world. In short, they wrote, “pessimists understand that a person has no real control over his or her life. Optimists believe they must place responsibility upon their own shoulders to locate meaning in the world and to strive towards that meaning. Above all, they agreed that being positive is cumulative and the same goes for being negative. They are learned behaviors. The question is how we remember to stay positive, what reminds us of all that is possible?”

Seemingly out of the blue, after the Torah discussion of the scouts and the repercussions of pessimism, comes a teaching about the tallit and the fringes on the corners of the garment. The text says: Ur-eetem oto uzkasr-tem – that you will look at the fringes and use that to remember what you are supposed to do.

G-d seemed to understand after the 10 great princes who lost their optimism, people need to remember what is possible. That is why, only at the end, we get

the lesson for success. We are commanded to wear the tzitzit, the fringes so we will look and remember our calling, our priorities, our purpose.

What is our “tzitzit?” What keeps us on track? We have the mezuzah on our door posts that we can kiss when entering a room. We may have necklaces, rings and special rocks but I believe we need something more than an object. Joshua had Caleb and Caleb had Joshua. That friendship kept the possible alive in their minds.

Our tzitzit are comprised of our community, our friends and our family. Like Caleb and Joshua, we need keep one another buoyed on what we can do to keep faith and goals alive. May we be graced with the blessing of optimism. Amen