

## Sermon | Parshat Shlach Lecha

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I did not schedule the congregational trip to Israel with this in mind, but it is perfect that I would deliver my last sermon of the season today when we read Parshat Shlach Lecha, the day before departing for Israel. The parsha begins with words that, by the chapter's end, the characters will come to regret: שְׁלַח־לְךָ אַנְשִׁים וַיְתִירוּ אֶת־אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן, "Send agents to scout the land of Canaan."<sup>1</sup> Much ink has been spilled trying to make sense of this directive and the narrative which follows it...so why not add a few more pages to the pile. In brief, Moses sends twelve scouts, one per tribe, to reconnoiter the Land of Israel, to examine the quality of the land, to assess its resident populations, and to scout out its cities and fortifications. About one year after leaving Egypt and receiving the Torah at Sinai, the Israelites are trying to determine what challenges are before them as they prepare to arrive in the Land. At first glance, God's instructions to Moses appear to be a reasonable way for the nation to prepare for what is ahead. The scouts return with a sobering message, one that frightens the Israelites:

We came to the land you sent us to; it does indeed flow with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. However, the people who inhabit the country are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large; moreover, we saw the Anakites there. Amalekites dwell in the Negeb region; Hittites, Jebusites, and Amorites inhabit the hill country; and Canaanites dwell by the Sea and along the Jordan.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Numbers 13:2.

<sup>2</sup> Numbers 13:27-29.

You can hear their concerns; the road ahead will not be easy. They are not denying that the land is indeed bountiful and fruitful, but the people and their cities are cause for concern. These people are strong and powerful; we are but migrants, recently freed slaves.

As we read earlier this morning, the entire episode does not end well. Two of the scouts, Joshua and Caleb, try to reassure the people that despite these challenges they will, with God's help, be able to conquer the land. But the odds are against them. The apprehensive voice of the ten drowns out the faithful voice of the two.

The Talmud, in Tractate Sotah, offers an extended *midrash* about this narrative. It condemns the scouts and the Israelites. It places the blame for this entire situation squarely on them, and exonerates God of any wrongdoing. The plan was flawed from the very start. It was the Israelites who wavered in their faithfulness to God. It was they who doubted themselves and it was they who doubted God. The *midrash* interprets the verse such that is the people, not God, who instructed the scouts to take on this mission. They could not overcome their fear of the unknown, regardless of what God and Moses tried to do to reassure them.

The Talmud even interprets the names of the scouts to demonstrate that they had poor intentions. One of the scouts is named *S'tur ben Micha'el*. He is called *S'tur* because he hid [*satar*] the actions of the Holy Blessed One.<sup>3</sup> The scouts forgot all about the miracles that God brought for the Israelites over the course of the past year: the plagues in Egypt, the splitting of the sea, the manna, and more. Or rather, they willfully ignored those miracles and chose instead to doubt God's strength and God's actions. They hid, *satar*, the actions of God. The rabbinic

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<sup>3</sup> Bavli Sotah 34b.

tradition, as evidenced in these Talmudic passages, castigates the scouts for their destructive pessimism and their lack of trust in God.

But, Robert Alter, a modern literary and biblical scholar, depicts the situation differently. He does not place the blame entirely on the scouts, but suggests that Moses too carries some of the responsibility. When Moses offers the instructions to the scouts he says, “Are the people who dwell in it strong or weak, few or many? Is the country in which they dwell good or bad? Are the towns they live in open or fortified? Is the soil rich or poor? Is it wooded or not?”<sup>4</sup> All of these questions are presented as binaries—Is it A or B? There is nothing in between. There is no gray area. Everything must be black or white. In his commentary on this verse Robert Alter writes, “The formulation of the mission of the scouts in terms of these binary opposites leads into the divided opinion of the report.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, the scouts were set up to return with a similarly divided report: ten saying that the challenges ahead were insurmountable and two claiming that everything would go well. Moses’ words to the scouts only presented two options, and left no room for a conversation in the space between.

In certain ways, life is easier when things are formulated in dichotomies and binaries. There is very little room for ambiguity, and therefore very little room for confusion. In their book, *Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard*, brothers and co-authors Chip and Dan Heath write, “What looks like resistance, is often a lack of clarity. So provide crystal-clear direction.”<sup>6</sup> When people push back, it is often because they are frustrated and do not fully understand your instructions. Consider what it is like to parent young children. Telling them in

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<sup>4</sup> Numbers 13:18-20.

<sup>5</sup> *The Five Books of Moses*, translation and commentary by Robert Alter, p. 746.

<sup>6</sup> Chip & Dan Heath, *Switch*, p. 17.

the morning to “get ready for school” is not clear. But saying “brush your teeth” and “pack your backpack” are much more explicit instructions, which minimize ambiguity and reduce the chance of resistance. But the task that Moses assigns to the scouts is not a simple one. After all, from where does one hold the assumption that *not* entering the land is an option? The question is not really whether they *should* continue their journey to the Land of Israel. Rather, the question is what should they reasonably expect to find once they arrive! Moses’ instructions do not make that clear, neither does he provide a way for them to provide any sort of a nuanced report.

Even if Moses did that, then the scouts still would have needed to speak to one another before reporting to the people. Perhaps the report could have been presented in a more nuanced way. Yes, there are challenges ahead (even Joshua and Caleb agreed with that), but whether we have the strength, the faith, and the trust in one another and in God to surmount those challenges is a matter of debate. That is both a healthier and a more productive way to begin this difficult conversation. The narrative of the scouts is not only about their negative report and their frightening of the people; it is also about an unwillingness to consider nuance, to operate in ambiguous space.

Luckily, our congregational tour group has not been tasked with reconnoitering the land and bringing back a report to B’nai Israel! We are not going to Israel as scouts to judge whether the land is livable. Neither are we going to Israel as just tourists, visiting a place to enjoy its sites, its smells, its cuisine. There might be moments when we act as tourists or that we feel that we are tourists, but we also know that Israel is a sort of “home” for world Jewry, regardless of where you make your permanent residence (or at least we aspire for that to be the case). The

banner that has stood in our atriums invokes that sentiment: One does not travel to Jerusalem, one returns. So we are somewhere *between* tourists and residents, we exist in that ambiguous space. I imagine that many of us are going to Israel with both excitement and hesitation. I have a deep love for the place, its people, and the way in which Jewish life has flourished there, affording so many the opportunity to live fully as Jews in our own homeland. And, we are also aware of the challenges that Israel faces internally in this moment. We travel to Israel with eyes wide open, appreciating the beauty and understanding the challenges. We must be comfortable living in that space, rather than seeing it all in binary terms.

All that being said, I do intend to return with a report of sorts. I hope to share with you, during the trip and once we return, some of the highlights: where we visit, what we learn, and how we experience being with one another in our ancestral Jewish homeland. I anticipate that some of the reports will be mixed, and we will not all agree on everything. But I also know that the conversations that we have at meals and on the bus, the relationships formed by walking Israel's ancient and modern sites, and the connections that we will form with one another and with Israel will sustain us and inspire us for many years to come.