

Sermon - Parshat Sh'lach Lecha
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By now I imagine that many of have heard about the potential “change government” forming in Israel. After four unsuccessful elections in the past two years, it appears that there might be a sufficient majority of 61 members of Knesset to form a governing coalition. This group of 61 is comprised of strange bedfellows: Meretz and Labor on the left; Blue & White and Yesh Atid in the center; Yamina, New Hope, and Yisrael Beiteinu on the right; and Ra’am, religious Muslim party. This coalition is labeled the “change government” because these disparate parties are brought together to literally *change* the government by unseating Prime Minister Netanyahu who has served in this role since March 2009. (For perspective, 2009 was the year that President Obama was sworn in for his *first* term). Their dislike of Netanyahu appears to be sufficient to form this new coalition, but when it comes time to govern and lead a country, how will these parties negotiate the tensions? How will they navigate competing interests? What will it look like in practice? Nobody knows the answers to those questions. What we do know, however, is that this coalition has chosen to live within the tension. Parshat Shl’ach offers us a window into what it means to live within the tension of life, and warns of the pitfalls of trying to do otherwise.

The *parsha* begins, “Adonai spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Send men to scout the land of Canaan (שְׁלַח־לְךָ אַנְשִׁים וַיְתַרְוּ אֶת־אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן), which I am giving to the Israelite people.’”¹ God instructs Moses to assemble a group of tribal leaders with the task of exploring the Land of

¹ Numbers 13:1-2.

Israel. They must go ahead of the people and find out what is in store for their future. Are there a lot of people there? What are they like? Where do they live? What is the land like? Logically, this makes sense; before you arrive in a particular place, it would be helpful to know what you can expect to find. This is not only about setting expectations, but also about being able to prepare for the challenges and opportunities that lay ahead.

This plan does not work out well for the scouts, or for the Israelites. The twelve scouts return after forty days and they share the same facts: the land is bountiful, the people who live there are powerful, and they live in large, fortified cities. This sends the people into a panic, and only two of the scouts speak up to calm them down: Joshua and Caleb. They emphasize the importance of faith in God, trusting that if this is indeed the land that God has assigned to the Israelites, then they have nothing to fear. But the people are not appeased. And God is angered. This generation, save for Caleb and Joshua, will not enter the Promised Land. Going out to see things on their own, they were led astray by one another, they lost faith in God, they endangered the people. Seeing with their own eyes was not helpful, but dangerous.

Which is why we must look now at the very end of the *parsha*. Those who are regular synagogue attendees will know this passage well. It is the third paragraph of the Shema, the one in which we read about the *mitzvah* of wearing *tzitzit*, ritual fringes: “That shall be your fringe; look at it and recall all the commandments of Adonai and observe them, (וְלֹא־תָתוּרוּ אַחֲרָי) (לְבַבְכֶם וְאַחֲרֵי עֵינֵיכֶם) so that you do not follow your heart and eyes in your lustful urge.”² Here, God warns us *not* to go looking around and listening to our hearts and seeing with our eyes. The same word is used here, תָּתוּרוּ, which was used at the beginning to instruct the scouts to

² Numbers 15:39.

explore the land, וַיִּתְּרוּ. Initially, it seems that God trusts us to use our senses to explore and understand the world around us. However, that experiment ends poorly, and now we are not to look at what is in the world before us, but instead to look at the fringes, the *tzitzit*, which remind us of the framework of *mitzvot* and *halakhah*, commandments and Jewish law.

Many attempts have been made to address the connection between the incident of the scouts and the commandment to wear *tzitzit*. They focus on what we might refer to as the *yetzer hara*, the evil inclination, a force naturally within us that animates our desires, even those that are potentially dangerous when left unchecked. From that perspective, we can explain why the scouts failed: they were motivated only by their gut feeling, by what they saw and heard. They forgot about their faith. They forgot about their past. They were shortsighted and misguided. That is, allegedly, the danger inherent in going out to see things for yourself, without guidance, framework, or context. And that is why the pendulum swings to the other extreme by the *parsha's* end. Now we are required to wear *tzitzit*, a constant reminder of the system to which we are subject, bound within the limits of what the Torah and our faith allows.

But I would like to propose an alternative. Rather than living at either of these extremes, let us attempt to live in the middle, to embrace the tension of a life lived in the world of modernity while holding on to the sacred heritage bequeathed to us by those who came before. I want to be able to go out and explore the world while holding on to my *tzitzit*. If only the scouts wore theirs, perhaps the story would have ended differently! We are empowered to go out and explore. What is the world like? What are the opportunities and challenges? At the same time, hold on to your *tzitzit*: Do not forget the past. You are the bearer of a sacred tradition. We must bring that with us into the future. Yes, we will encounter tensions and

difficulties. But therein lies the beauty of life—learning to navigate through the tensions holding on to the wisdom of our past, but without being stuck in it.

It is too easy to be extremist or reductionist. We have seen the dangers of polarization in the American political scene, in Jewish religious life, and elsewhere. Perhaps it would be easier to live a carefree life, unencumbered by the customs, rules, and limits of Judaism. Perhaps it would be easier to live entirely within what our Orthodox coreligionists refer to as “the four cubits of *halakhah*,” bound by the strictures of the most stringent interpretations of Torah. Living in the grey space between those two worlds is where we are as Conservative Jews, and that is not always easy. But, at least from my perspective, it is meaningful, and it is beautiful. We are empowered to go out and explore, learn about the world and understand it more deeply, and we do that while maintaining an attachment to our traditions and values. We explore the world while holding on to our *tzitzit*, physically and metaphorically.

Last year, Rabbi Safra and I agreed that the pandemic presented a *sha’at d’chak*, literally “a pressing hour,” or an unprecedented circumstance (are you tired of hearing that phrase yet?). As a result, we decided that it would be acceptable, for this moment in time, to constitute a minyan over Zoom, as long as we could see ten faces on the screen participating in the service. But as the pandemic wanes and restrictions are gradually lifted, we ask the question: Is this still a *sha’at d’chak*? In the beginning, we identified *halakhic* leniencies given the circumstances. We looked out at the world before us and responded to reality. Now, more than a year later, with dramatically different circumstances, we look down at the metaphorical *tzitzit* in our hands and ask, “What comes next?” It may be that the time has come to return to in-person *minyanim* during the week. That is a conversation we are currently having. It would

have been easy to stay at the extreme from the outset—if there aren't ten in the room, then it isn't a minyan. And it would be easy to remain where we are now—if ten on Zoom was good enough for this year, why not for next? But I assert that Judaism encourages us to live within the tension. We live in the present while maintaining a meaningful connection to the past.

May we all be explorers of the world who always remember to hold on to our *tzitzit*.

Shabbat shalom.