

Context Matters – Parashat Shelah 5778

Rabbi Michael Safra

“The land that we traversed and scouted is one that devours its inhabitants.” – Ten Scouts, Parashat Shelach, 1200 BCE.

“The State will not be given to the Jewish people on a silver platter.” – Chaim Weizman, Haaretz newspaper, December 15, 1947.

When I was in college, the Hillel at the University of Michigan used to sponsor an award, which they called the Golden Apple. Students nominated their favorite professors, and the winner was invited to deliver a “final lecture,” a summary lesson for his or her work. It’s been many years, but one of those lectures sticks with me.

Professor Thomas Collier taught a course on 20th Century American Wars. In his lecture, he argued that, when exploring history, your interpretation of events is dependent on the questions that you ask. Facts devoid of context are meaningless. He gave the example of dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki – emotionally charged decisions, to say the least. The usual historical question is: Did dropping these bombs end World War II, thereby saving American lives? And the answer is yes. The bombs were dropped on August 6 and 9; Japan surrendered on August 15, 1945.

But what if you ask a slightly different question? Was there another way to end the war? Professor Collier suggested that Japan had already been negotiating for surrender; and the final terms were quite similar to what they had proposed. Collier argued that there might have been other ways. And he gave other examples to support his thesis that context matters. Responsible students must take pains to question their assumptions without jumping to conclusions. If you are absolutely sure about the answer to any difficult question, then your examination is probably incomplete.

Parashat Shelach provides an interesting example. We have now read the story. Moses selects scouts to visit the land that they are preparing to conquer; they all see the same thing and report the same facts. It is a beautiful and bountiful land, and it is inhabited by giants. Ten of the scouts ask about the giants and determine it would be impossible to conquer the land; two of them focus on the land and the promise, and determine it is worth trying. The people jump to the conclusions of the ten; they assemble against Moses; and the results are tragic.

The Rabbis embellished the narrative. How could it be, they ask, that these scouts would have called the land “ארץ אוכלת יושביה,” a land that devours its inhabitants”? Don Isaac Abravanel says that this was the charge that tipped the scales to the negative side. But how could they say such a thing? Were they lying?

The Talmud answers that this was something that God did intending for good; but the people saw it and internalized it for bad. You see, say the Rabbis, God had actually arranged for many Cananites

to die that day – for two purposes. First, the Israelites should see that even though they were many, the Canaanites were mortal and would be defeated. And furthermore, God had arranged for the Canaanites to be busy conducting funerals and burying their dead that day so that they wouldn't notice the Israelite spies; they were concentrating on other things.

It turns out that the land *did* devour its inhabitants. The people were supposed to see that and find strength in the possibility that the Canaanites could be defeated in fulfillment of a divine promise. But, tragically, they jumped to another conclusion.

Fast forward more than 2000 years. It is 1947. The United Nations has just passed its Partition Plan to divide Palestine into separate Jewish and Arab states. The Jewish people are elated, having received quasi-recognition from an international body. But there are other questions. The Arabs reject the plan, and it becomes clear that war is inevitable. The facts are unambiguous. The Arabs are far more numerous, and their armies are better trained. This is not going to be easy; and it may even be impossible. Months later, Yagael Yadin, chief operations officer of the Haganah, will tell David Ben Gurion that the odds of a Jewish victory are only about 50-50.

So which facts take precedence? The jubilation of the moment or the reality of impending war? Chaim Weizman, soon to become Israel's first president, chooses both. This is no time to stand down, but don't think it will be easy. He warns in Haaretz newspaper: "The state will not be given to the Jewish people on a silver platter."

Four days later, Natan Alterman publishes a poem that seizes on those words. He could not have known how prophetic he was:

והארץ תשקוט

And the land grows still,

The red eye of the sky slowly dimming over smoking frontiers.

As the nation arises,

Torn at heart but breathing,

To receive its miracle, the only miracle.

As the ceremony draws near, it will rise,

Standing erect in the moonlight in terror and joy

When across from it will step out a youth and a lass and slowly march toward the nation.

Dressed in battle gear, dirty,

Shoes heavy with grime, they ascend the path quietly

To change garb, to wipe their brow, they have not yet found time.

Still bone weary from days and from nights in the field

Full of endless fatigue and unrested.

The dew of their youth is still seen on their head
As they stand at attention, giving no sign of life or death

Then a nation in tears and amazement will ask: "Who are you?"
And they will answer quietly,
"We Are the silver platter on which the Jewish state was given."

Such will they say as they fall back in the shadows.
And the rest will be told in the chronicles of Israel.

I see in this poem an answer to the mistake of the spies. Don't jump to conclusions. The facts are that this is our moment. ... AND it will be difficult, debilitating, uncertain. Reality is not black or white; it is cloudy and gray, with arguments on both sides. This year we celebrate the 70th anniversary of a decision that changed the trajectory of Jewish history.

Of course, it still isn't easy. It is difficult to talk about Israel from the pulpit because so many want to jump to conclusions, to ask and answer one set of questions while pretending the other questions don't exist. The results are often emotionally charged.

Israel's detractors point to the suffering of the Palestinian people. The majority of Palestinians are civilians who mean no harm to anyone. Conditions in Gaza are not good. Residents suffer every day. These are facts that some use to jump to conclusions: Israel is responsible for all suffering; Israel responds to provocations in unacceptable ways. Some even conclude that the Jewish people are not indigenous, that we have no historical claim to the land, that the state of Israel is illegitimate.

And there are others who point to different facts. Today's Torah portion is one of MANY to chronicle the thousands' year connection of the Jewish people to its homeland. There was no "Palestinian people" prior to 1948; Arabs living in Palestine in the Ottoman period did not have national aspirations. The experience of the Holocaust should have taught the world what happens to the Jewish people without a state. These are facts too.

The question for idealists and lovers of Israel and lovers of peace is: Can we accept both sets of facts simultaneously? I'm not talking about peace negotiations; the political moment isn't right. But emotionally, intellectually – can we affirm that Israel is our homeland, a source of pride, the fulfillment of our dream, AND that the situation as it is is not acceptable? We are not dealing with true and false; the state is not given to us on a Silver Platter.

That, to me, is where the Scouts came up short. They didn't have to deny the facts. But they jumped to the wrong conclusion. The land was beautiful and bountiful. AND the enemy was formidable. AND their settlement in the land would fulfill an ancient divine promise.

Imagine if they could have accepted all those facts, if they could have marched with confidence towards the Promised Land, bracing for battle as necessary, while still affirming what the prophet Micah would one day articulate as our national dream:

In the days to come,
Torah shall come forth from Zion
And the world of the Lord from Jerusalem.
And God will judge among the many peoples,
And they will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation shall no longer lift up sword against nation
They shall never again no war
And every person will sit under his grapevine or fig tree
With no one to disturb him
For it was the Lord of Hosts who spoke.

Shabbat Shalom.