

Are We Part of the “Evil Congregation”?
Parashat Shelach Lecha
June 14, 2014
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We might think of the Torah--in fact, we're encouraged to think of the Torah-- as an eternal guidebook for living our lives; a work that has a lot to teach us whoever we are, and wherever and whenever we happen to live. And yet it's important to recognize that the Torah does read differently to different people living in different places and under different circumstances. This week's parashah is a case in point.

We've already heard two very nice reactions to today's Torah reading by our bnai mitzvah, one focusing on the two scouts who urged the people to enter the land, and the other on the ten scouts who argued against entering the land of Canaan. What struck me as I was reflecting on these two drashot is that they beautifully reflect us and our community and they do what drashot should do: they take the text of the Torah and seek to apply its messages to our lives. Consequently, and unsurprisingly, in so doing, they reveal and they highlight one of the great challenges that lie before us, as individuals and as members of the American Jewish community. Let me explain.

This is one of those parashiyot that sound particularly different and are interpreted particularly differently in different places. Think about it: Imagine that we were in Israel right now, and we were reading the story: A group of Jewish ex-slaves that has managed, against all odds, to drag themselves out of their oppressive homeland, away from the clutches of their former masters, into the wilderness—which is not a hospitable place to live— and they're right on the



brink, right on the edge of entering the Promised Land, the land of Israel, the Land where their ancestors had lived, the Land to which they are heading—the Land where you live and work, where you’re raising a family, and living out your dreams—and they check it out, and decide, “Sorry, we can’t make it. It’s too much of a challenge. Let’s head back to Egypt.” Your reaction is going to be: “Were they crazy? Were they a bunch of ‘wusses’? Of course they can make it! We did!” And rather than identifying with those people who lost heart, you, as an Israeli, are more likely to identify those ex-slaves with the entire diaspora, that is, all those Jews who, though given the opportunity to do so, have turned away from the golden opportunity presented to them, and have elected not to make aliyah to Israel and make a life for themselves there.

This is one of the parashiot that’s more likely to be interpreted metaphorically (as it was by our bnai mitzvah) in the United States, but politically in Israel.

So let’s step back and ask ourselves: What does this parashah have to teach us about our choice to live here in the States rather than in a free, Jewish state in the land of Israel?

It’s easy to feel or to sound or to be defensive, when discussing this topic. I remember visiting Israel as a college student in the mid 1970s. I was sitting at a bus stop at the airport, when an elderly woman struck up a conversation with me. “What brings you here?” she asked. I told her, and then she asked what was for her an obvious question: “Why don’t you come here to live?”

I can’t think of a better anecdote to share with people to capture the idea that a trip to Israel, though it may take place during a vacation period, is not a vacation. That’s not usually the question you get asked if you go to Mexico or the Carribean, or Europe or Australia. But Israel is different from all of those countries—to a Jew, at least—because unlike all the rest of them, Israel was established to be a

refuge for Jews, to be a homeland for Jews. It is a homeland for Jews. It's natural for those living in the homeland, that is, Israelis, to wonder about those who aren't, and to ask us, "Why aren't you living here?"

The implicit questions lurking behind that seemingly innocent question are: "Wouldn't you be more fulfilled here? Isn't this where you belong? We didn't establish this state just for ourselves; we established it for you and for all Jews wherever they live. Why haven't you chosen to do your part to fulfill this dream of Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel?" Here, you and your children and your children's children would be truly at home. Your Jewishness, your Jewish identity would no longer be marginal, it would no longer be an "add-on," it would be central to your identity. What's keeping you?" They might put it bluntly, and personally, and ask: "Why have you chosen to remain in the fleshpots of Egypt? Why have you turned your backs on your homeland? Why are you abandoning us?"

To me, "*aliyah*," in those days, wasn't the name of a synagogue in Needham, Massachusetts; it was the dream of moving to Israel, of serving in the army, of living out the Zionist dream, the fulfillment of the two-thousand-year-old Jewish hope of living as free Jews in our Promised Land. Wasn't I, along with everyone else I had grown up with, except for the one or two who had made aliyah, turning our backs on the opportunity to make a difference?

I took those questions seriously, and I still do.

I don't get asked those questions when I go to Israel these days.

I've changed—and Israel has changed. In the 70s, Israel was a poor country. America was the land of enormous opportunity. There used to be a joke: How do you make a small fortune in Israel? The answer: Come with a large one.

Things have changed. It has a huge number of millionaires and billionaires. Yes, there is widespread poverty in Israel. Yes, there is political turmoil in Israel. But there is the opportunity for intelligent, ambitious, resourceful people to do

quite well there. On my most recent trip there I visited the Google headquarters in Tel Aviv. While there, an Israeli iPhone app that I used, was bought by Google for several billion dollars. (It's called Waze.) Israel is no longer the poor starving cousin. Israel is an economic powerhouse, a "start-up nation."

But I think those uncomfortable questions are still important ones for us to ask ourselves, for Israel's sake and for our sake: What is our connection with Israel? What should it be? Are we like those ten scouts, who, presented with the opportunity to enter the Promised Land, turn away?

It's hard, when we read the parashah with this framework in mind, to compare ourselves to Joshua and Caleb. After all, we're here and not there. And we're not biding our time, waiting for the right moment to come to enter the land. We—most of us, at least—are satisfied with our lives here and are not about to become new immigrants.

Is there a way to bridge the two readings of our parashah-- that is, the purely personal, metaphorical reading of the text as a teaching about courage and resilience, a teaching about conquering debilitating fear and despair; and the national, cultural reading of the text that confronts us with a choice that we are turning away from, the choice to enter the land, the real live, Land of Israel, and claim our inheritance?

I think that there is. I wouldn't be saying this if we were living in the Arab world, or in Europe or parts of Africa or Asia, or in any of the many, many places in the world where not just Jews but people of all nationalities live in oppressed societies. At least I don't think I would.

But I'm not. We're not. We are not living in Egypt, by which I mean, we're not living a life of slavery and oppression in a land of oppression. We are living free lives in a free country that guarantees freedom to all, whatever their ethnicity, religious background, race or national origin. There may be fleshpots here, but

that's not the main reason or the only reason that we can justify staying here. We can justify staying here because we can, if we put our efforts into it, live meaningful, fulfilled Jewish lives here. We need not move to Israel to live Jewish lives or to raise Jewish children. Of course, it is not an easy choice: Jewishness is not a default here. It isn't the natural choice for us, and it certainly isn't the natural choice for our children. But it can be done. And, of course, it should be done.

But what of the Land: the Land that beckons to us?

Well, there's no question about it: the Land is the Holy Land; it's holy to our people at least as much as it is holy to other faiths. And the Zionist project of establishing a Jewish state in Israel is a noble one. So moving to Israel, staking our claim there, is a holy act. And if we choose not to do that, it doesn't free us from responsibility toward our brothers and sisters there. Not only should we provide them with the kind of support that we would offer any Jewish community anywhere, but we should realize that the state is the fulfillment of our collective dreams, and so we must support it as such. Needless to say, we should never malign the state, or disparage it, as did the ten chieftains who spread *dibat ha-aretz ra-ah*—evil rumors about the place. To the contrary, we should speak up on Israel's behalf, and support the country and be the best advocates for Israel that we can possibly be. That doesn't mean, of course, that we should be blind to Israel's faults. Like any other nation, including our own, we must not suspend our critical powers when we turn our attention to Israel. But we mustn't point fingers: If there's a problem, let's address it as “our” problem, not “their” problem. Lord knows, Israel gets far more than its share of criticism, condemnations, scorn, and hatred from those who would gladly destroy it. We mustn't ally ourselves with them.

Let me conclude by saying that I'm not trying to let us off scot-free. I am saying that if we are among those who have decided not to immigrate to Israel, we

don't have to feel as though we've abandoned our homeland. But that's only if we don't turn away from Israel. That's only if indeed we commit ourselves to learning about Israel, going to Israel, travelling throughout the country, "*yamah v' kedmah, tsafonah v'negba,*" "north, south, east, and west," and becoming the best advocates for Israel that we can possibly be.