

Lessons from the Spies  
Shlach Lecha

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*June 14, 2014*

The incident of the *meraglim*, the spies, is clearly one of the great disasters of the Bible, if not, of all of Jewish history.

It had the exact opposite impact than its intended purpose. The 12 individual spies, each leaders in their own right were intimidated by what they saw and bring back a report that describes the land as being unconquerable. On the contrary: they say it is a “land that devours its inhabitants.” Rather than instill confidence in the people prior to their entry to the Land of Israel, the people were demoralized and panic ensued. As a result of all that transpired, they are condemned to wander for 40 years in the desert, so that a new generation, unbridled by the mentality of slavery will be the ones to enter the Promised Land.

The episode can be explored from multiple perspectives to see what insights can be learned from this incident.

The first question to be asked is why was the mission undertaken in the first place? Was it even necessary? The way the story is presented, it is as if the people doubted Moses and God when told that they would be able to enter the land.

The Malbim, a 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian commentator places the blame on the people who exerted enormous pressure on Moses to send the mission. That is why the opening words are *shlach lecha* – send for yourself. It is as if Moses succumbs to the people’s insecurity and goes along with their demands to reconnoiter the land. It is, on one level, a failure of leadership. Moses should have stood up to the people, but for whatever reason he did not.

One of the most difficult challenges of being a leader, especially in a democratic society, is knowing when to listen to the people, and when to listen to your heart or your inner instinct, when to go along, and when to stand up for principle, even when it may be the unpopular thing to do.

Earlier this week, House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, the highest ranking Jew in American history was defeated in a primary election. Without going into details speculating on the reason for his loss – the issue that concerns me is exactly the one that confronted Moses: When to listen to the clamoring of the people, and when to rise above it and exert leadership. Our country and our leaders must decide if the small radical fringe, known as the Tea Party is going to be allowed to exert influence beyond its numbers on the political direction of our country?

How many more of our children or teachers in schools, people going to shopping malls or movie theaters need to be gunned down before we say enough to the tyranny of those who oppose gun control legislation? How much longer will we tolerate a system which does not allow the passage of any kind of sensible gun control laws?

Shortly after Lyndon Johnson became president he was told that he could not get civil rights legislation passed, and that it would be impractical, unpopular and unadvisable to even attempt to do so. He decided to proceed decisively anyway, saying, “If I can’t do that, then what good is it to be President?”

He understood the importance of using power to bring about lasting change, for the good of all and that leadership meant exactly that: leading.

Moses, in a rare moment of weakness, probably against his better judgment submitted to the will of the people.

But that is not all that went wrong. The report itself contained severe inherent contradictions. While saying that the land consumes its inhabitants, the spies also reported that it produces men of great stature who are daunting. Instead of bringing back an objective report, which is what intelligence is supposed to do, they tempered it and brought back subjective information.

While we watch in frustration the march of a militant extremist group towards seizing power in Iraq, many are questioning the failure of our intelligence to see any of this coming. Ari Shavit in his book, "My Promised Land" devotes a chapter to the existential threat posed to Israel by the prospect of Iran acquiring nuclear capability. He writes that by 2005 all Western intelligence agencies were cognizant of the Iranian nuclear program and cites the critical role played by the National Intelligence Estimate in 2007 in defusing appetite to do anything about the problem. The report presented the opinion of all 16 American spy agencies that there was no conclusive evidence that Iran was trying to build a nuclear weapon. But Israeli analysts who poured over the report found serious fault and discrepancies in it and came to a different conclusion. Shavit explains that the NIE report was manipulated by the intelligence community because they feared what would happen if the US were to launch a war against an Islamic country, so soon after the American invasion of Iraq.

The lessons of the problem with subjective and faulty intelligence had not been learned.

And finally, we read about Joshua's name being changed by Moses from Hoshea to Yehoshua. Rashi suggests that it is changed because it means, "May God save you." For Moses is praying for his disciple. He is concerned about his safety – be it on the journey, or to save him from the counsel of the other spies.

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