

**This Week In Torah *Shelach L'cha***  
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**6/18/20**

- The report from the spies that Moses sent into the land verified God's promise of a land with much richness. It was beautiful and bountiful. But the spies also reported back about the inhabitants of the land who appeared larger than life and lived in walled, fortified cities.
- In 1940, Rabbi Dr. Abraham Joshua Heschel arrived in Cincinnati, Ohio—which was a far cry from his home in Poland. It was a long journey for this heir to a Chasidic dynasty. In 1936, the Nazis expelled him from Berlin, where he was teaching in with Martin Buber in the Lehrhaus program after Heschel received his PhD. Back in Poland, he received an invitation to teach at the Hebrew Union College. His English was poor and his knowledge of Reform Judaism was even worse.
- Upon hearing a negative report from 10 of the 12 spies, the majority of the Israelites responded with panic and fear about the prospect of moving into such a land; fearing that they are nothing more than “grasshoppers,” how could they successfully conquer the land promised to them.
- In his new environment, Heschel was not a faculty member; rather he was a teaching fellow. A Chasidic prince in Europe with a prestigious academic pedigree was assigned the most basic classes to teach. He was given a small stipend and lived in the dormitories with the students. He and other European scholars were seen as “Foreign Fellows in Exile.”
- Caleb and Joshua stood up in front of the people and spoke with optimism and faith in God. Caleb said: “Let us by all means go up and we shall gain possession of it, for we surely will overcome it!” But the other spies chastised him, admitting defeat before any conquest began by stating that these people were stronger than the Israelites.
- Heschel, by numerous accounts, had an irenic personality. He had a calm demeanor. Never wavered about his goals about life in America. He threw himself into mastering English, learning about civics, and identifying issues that were troubling to him. In a less than two years, Heschel wrote an essay in English, entitled “An Analysis of Piety.” In it, he took on the most prominent Jewish emigrant of the time, Albert Einstein, and his concept of God and Judaism. Heschel wrote: “The pious man is possessed by his awareness of the presence and nearness of God. Everywhere and at all times he lives as in His sights, whether he remains always heedful of His proximity or not... Awareness of God is as close to him as the throbbing of his own heart, often deep and calm, but at times overwhelming, intoxicating setting the soul on fire.”
- The Israelites in the wilderness were paralyzed with fear. They doubt themselves as they lacked the full trust and faith in God.

- In the same essay, Heschel concluded: “Man’s task is to reconcile liberty with service, reason with faith. This is the deepest wisdom a man can obtain. It is our ultimate destiny to serve with self-dedication to the Divine.”
- How the Israelites should have heard such wisdom! It might have spared God’s wrath that followed. Indeed, much later in Jewish history, the Talmud [Sanhedrin 21b] summarizes that faith in God can be cultivated by learning from tradition mixed with “*da’at*” [knowledge] of God. What “*da’at*” is open to interpretation—the mystics would define it through *kabbalistic* realities found through meditation and such; while the rationalist would define it through philosophical pursuits and experiential encounters. Neither was utilized by the Israelites; instead they succumbed to the knee-jerk practice of responding with anger, fear, and rebellion.
- During this time, Heschel was fond of teaching in congregations throughout Cincinnati. He often taught *Or Adonai*, which a 14th century text was written by Hasdai Crescas. Crescas’ main point was about the supremacy of God’s teaching and the Jewish tradition of textual understanding over the pragmatic infusion of neo-Aristotelian philosophy into Jewish thought. Here, Heschel was modeling for himself what it meant to be an American Jew—faith to God, active in his embrace of his new national status.

These are powerful metaphors and analogies for us. As American Jews, we do a dance between our Jewish roots and our American authenticity. But Heschel speaks of a unique fusion of the two that can strengthen us in both realms. Our Jewish souls compel us to act and engage in our society that makes our convictions based in spiritual values and Eternal truths. Our American identity strengthens our conviction to challenge and wrestle with difficult concepts and shield us from succumbing to blind conformity.

Had our Israelite ancestors in the wilderness of Sinai understood the power of fusing national identity with their personal connection to God! They would not have panicked—with some trembling and some reservations, they would have moved forward with conviction.