

Shelach – Dvar Torah

Saturday, June 20, 2020

As I shared in my introduction, this week's Torah portion *Shelach* opens with the tragic story of the spies and their punishment. But there is another punishment toward the end of the reading that is equally tragic.

How do these two incidents relate and what might they suggest for us today living in the time of the novel coronavirus.

The Spies

Let's begin with the spies: who were they and what did they do to warrant such a horrific death.

They were leaders, princes of their tribes, men of distinction, and cited by name in the text: Gaddi, son of Susi; Amiel, son of Gamli and so on.

And their charge was straightforward: "Go up there into the Negev and on into the hill and see what kind of country it is. Are the people who dwell in it strong or weak, few or many? Are the towns they live in open or fortified? Is the soil rich or poor?"

When the spies return after 40 days, they report to the community on what they saw and all but two of the scouts - Caleb and Joshua - are punished later: struck down by a plague.

So what is their sin?

They did what they were told; they reported what they saw – the good, bad and ugly.

Commentators suggest that **their sin is that they didn't trust God** and were incapable of seeing beyond their own fear. They saw certain failure and defeat and as a result amplified their description of the so-called Giants that inhabited this milk and honey-land. And, this fear led to murmurings against the community's leaders – namely Moses and Aaron – and ultimately dismay spread like a virus among the entire people.

Another example is their poignant statement that they seemed like grasshoppers in their own eyes and so too in the eyes of the giants. They first saw themselves as puny and they in turn extrapolated that the giants saw them that way too. Their fear distorted their view of reality.

Still, did their punishment fit the crime?

The Wood Gatherer

Which brings me to the other tragic story wedged into the text toward the end of the portion; it is the story of the wood gatherer, which appears just **after** verses about what offering should be brought by a person who sins unknowingly, and just **before** the instructions on *tzizit*.

According to Numbers 15:32-36, a man is gathering wood on the Sabbath. He was brought before Moses, Aaron and the people for judgement. As the punishment was unknown for such a case, the man was first imprisoned; then, upon God's directive to Moses, he was stoned by the people outside of the camp. Literally the text reads: "The whole community pelted him with stones."

On the surface, the story appears to draw a distinction between a sin committed unintentionally vs. one that is deliberate; and as a proof text explaining why we must don *tzizit* - in order to remind us of God's commands.

The latter text is a familiar one, the last paragraph of the Shema which is recited daily and on Shabbat: "And Hashem said to Moses saying: Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them [that they must] make for themselves *tzizit* upon the corners of the clothes for generations....and they will see them and they will remember all of the commandments of Hashem and they will do them... (Numbers, 15:37-48). "

Still, the story of this wood gatherer is troubling. The punishment seems particularly harsh, and everyone joined mob-like in the brutal stoning of a member of their own community. And interestingly, unlike the spies, the wood gatherer in the text is nameless.

Or is he?

Zelophehad and his Daughters

There is a section of Talmud that suggests that the wood gatherer wasn't some anonymous Israelite who didn't know about Shabbat, but rather he was named **Zelophehad**, a man whom we are introduced to later in the Book of Numbers as a father of 5 daughters.

The Gemara cites in the name of Rabbi Akiva: "And the children of Israel were in the desert and they found a man gathering wood on the day of Shabbat. And who was this man? He was the father of the daughters of Zelophehad, it is stated: "Our father died in the desert and he was not among the company of them that gathered themselves together against the Lord **but he died in his own sin**, and he had no sons" (Numbers 27:3).

Our sages suggest that Zelophehad knew what he was doing: that he **intentionally** set out to violate Shabbat by gathering wood so as to bring attention to the commandment. In essence, he sacrificed himself to make a point: the Sabbath is holy and the people must keep it.

And there's more – these daughters of Zelophehad - named Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah - came to Moses to make a case that given they had no brothers, they should inherit their Father's portion of the land. They asked, "Why should our father's name disappear from his clan because he had no son?"

God told Moses that the plea of the daughters was just and they could inherit their father's portion of the land.

The case of Zelophehad's daughters set a precedent and expanded the legal rights of women. One could argue they were history's first feminists.

As an aside – 36 years ago Shira and I named our first born daughter Noa. She didn't particularly like her name until, as a teen, she met several Israelis named Noa at the Jewish summer camp she attended. Earlier, when she protested her name, we always reminded her that we could have chosen one of the other daughters' names and called her Hoglah or Mahlah!

In all seriousness, we actually called her Noa **because** she was among the daughters of Zelophehad and we hoped that our Noa would be strong enough in her life to assert herself for what is right and just.

Which brings me back to the spies and how these two stories connect.

Women as Spies

Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim of Lunshitz, author of the *Kli Yakar*, in his commentary on the story of the spies, makes a bold statement: "**Hashem said to Moses – it would have been better to have sent women [as spies], since they love the land, and would never speak ill of it.**" The *Kli Yakar* asserts that the spies were more concerned with their status as princes and their social footing, both of which would be threatened once they entered the promised land. The women however **trusted God** and were unwavering in their faith in God's promise.

University of Houston's Brene (Breh-nay) Brown, the author of numerous books including *Braving the Wilderness* and *Dare to Lead*, captures this essence of the *Kli Yakar* when she writes: "It turns out that trust is in fact earned in the smallest of moments. It is earned not through heroic deeds, or even highly visible actions, but through paying attention, listening, and gestures of genuine care and connection."

There is a leadership philosophy called "Servant leadership" where the leader shares influence by putting the needs of others first. Instead of the people working to serve the leader, the leader exists to serve the people. Among the most

important characteristics of servant leaders include **active listening, empathy, awareness, commitment to the growth of others and the building of community**. Perhaps if Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim of Lunshitz were writing today, he would make the connection between “servant leadership” and some of the unique leadership qualities that many women bring to their leadership roles: including intuition, humility, and a commitment to lifting up and building the voices of others.

Conclusion

Which brings me back to the beginning – the connection between our two tragic stories in Shelach: the episode of the spies and the tale of the wood gatherer.

I wonder if the outcome of this story would have been different if Moses had sent spies who were **women**. Perhaps the results would have been the same, or, perhaps, the women would have employed servant leadership skills such as **awareness, commitment to the growth of others and the building of community** and the conversation with God may have ended with the Jewish people entering the promised land a generation sooner.

I also wonder had the **daughters** of the wood-gatherer, Zelophehad, not challenged the status quo – employing more direct and decisive leadership skills by speaking frankly with God after their father’s tragic death - women may not have been seen as equals under the law.

I’m reminded of the words of Facebook COO and Founder of Leanin.org, Sheryl Sandberg, who said: “Leadership is about making others better as a result of your presence, and making sure that impact lasts in your absence.”

In that spirit, two of my partners at Federation, our Board President, Leslie Shuman Kramer and Miriam Abramovich, the Director of the Center for Jewish Engagement and Learning – both TBT members - have created a unique two-day retreat this fall for women of the Federation Board called *Women Leading*. I’m so proud that Leslie and Miriam along with Board members Cheryl Stein and Marina Maulucci Finkelstein, have fashioned an opportunity for women board members to build and deepen relationships with one another. When they gather, they will discuss what Jewish life needs from leaders. I know that their exploration and conversation and what they learn together will have a direct application to their leadership work not only through Federation but throughout Jewish Buffalo, “making an impact last in their absence.”

In closing, I wonder too if in this time of darkness, responding to the challenges of the Coronavirus in our country would be different if there were more women leading us. Whether in the highest levels of industry, health care and government – perhaps our experiences of the last 4 months would have been quite different.

Well– they actually have been – but not here in the US, for in each of the countries that have been most successful in fighting the coronavirus, their top leader is a woman. In New Zealand, under the leadership of Prime Minister Jacinda (Jah-sinda) Ardern, the country has been largely successful in meeting its ambitious goal of eradicating, rather than just controlling, outbreaks of Covid-19. Germany, led by Angela Merkel, has had a far lower death rate than Britain, France, Italy or Spain. Finland, where 34 year-old Prime Minister Sanna Marine, governs with a coalition of four female-led parties, has had fewer than 10 percent as many deaths as nearby Sweden.

I close with a quotation from one of the greatest leaders of the Jewish people, the 4th Prime Minister of Israel, Golda Meir - a wise, strong, brave, and true servant leader - who said: “It's no accident many accuse me of conducting public affairs with my heart instead of my head. Well, what if I do? Those who don't know how to weep with their whole heart don't know how to laugh either.”

Shabbat Shalom!