

## Shelach – June 29, 2019

Shelach is a relatively famous parsha – and its fame comes right from the first line, when God directs Moses to send out scouts to the land of Canaan. Moses immediately does as he is told, choosing leaders from each of the 12 tribes. Before he sends them off, he provides them with specific instructions of his own. While God simply says to send scouts, Moses adds specific questions:

- See what kind of country it is
- Are the people who dwell in it strong or weak?
- Are they few or many?
- Is the country good or bad?
- Are the towns open or fortified?
- Is the soil rich or poor?
- Is it wooded or not?

Moses then adds that the men should “be of good courage,” and finally, he instructs them to “bring back the fruit of the land.”

Forty days later they return, carrying, among other fruit, a huge cluster of grapes. They indeed report on a lush and bountiful land. But 10 of the 12 spies warn that the inhabitants of the land are giants and warriors “more powerful than we.” Only Caleb and Joshua insist that the land can be conquered.

What follows is rather predictable: The people cry that they’d rather return to Egypt. God gets really angry and, because Moses intercedes, doesn’t kill everyone then and there, but instead declares that Israel’s entry into the land will be delayed - wait for it - 40 years (that number really has staying power), during which time that entire generation will die out in the desert. The 10 spies who were negative about entering the land all get killed in a plague, and then the Israelites, who now feel really remorseful, disobey God’s plan and storm the mountain on the border of the Land, saying we’re now ready to enter. Of course, they are then slaughtered by the Amalekites and Canaanites.

This spy story has always made me a bit uncomfortable and confused. My confusion stems from the punishment that the spies get for their report. Is what they did really that bad? What's the big deal? Their report is not inaccurate at all; they simply do not exude confidence, and they suggest that they will be conquered by the giants who live in the land (which in fact is what comes to happen, weirdly enough).

The obvious answer to my confusion is that the spies should have had confidence in God, given all they have witnessed in the desert of his great power, and as leaders, they should have instilled confidence in the people. Instead, their report convinced everyone that returning to Egypt was better than moving forward, and really, as leaders of their tribes, they should have known what the reaction of the people would be to that report.

But this does not satisfy me, for lots of reasons. First, why does God say to send scouts in the first place? Why not just cross over and enter Canaan? God has shown them, through numerous signs and wonders, that he has their back – this seems like a bit of a setup. Second, think back to what Moses did before sending them out – he gives them at least 7 different concerns they should look into, and then tells them to be strong and not worry, and then tells them to bring back some sample fruit.

Imagine this – that's like saying, before sending your kid on a playdate, something like: OK, go this time, but come back and tell me,

- what kind of a house is it?
- Are the parents who live there loud or quiet?
- How many people live in the house?
- Is the neighborhood good or bad?
- Are there gates around the house?
- Are there trees on the property?
- Does the family seem wealthy or poor?

Bring back some of the lunch they give you, and btw, don't worry – be courageous! If God coming up with this idea of scouts is a setup, Moses's follow-up with all those

specific directives is much worse. It reveals his own considerable trepidation, plants seeds of trepidation in the scouts, and worse, suggests that the scouts' answers to those questions may legitimately influence whether the Israelites should enter the land.

Third, those grapes ARE really, really big – seems like the 10 spies who were terrified kind of analyzed the situation properly. And finally, I think what always made me uncomfortable is that I identify with those 10 spies who were terrified. Am I alone in this, or does anyone else here feel that they, too, would have returned going – “Uh, looks nice, but I’m afraid we need to rethink this idea.”

Like Sam’s d’var from a few weeks ago, I’m afraid I don’t have any answers to my question about why God does what he does and why Moses follows up with even more anxiety-ridden directives. Sorry. (You should know that Ramban did delve into those questions I raised about Moses, and while his analysis was logical, I still didn’t find it particularly compelling.)

In any event, I think the story of the spies is instructive because it is just so very human. Whether the punishment fits the crime or not, the reality is that I understand those spies, and I understand those Israelites. I, too, am one of those worrywarts who always sees the negative in plunging ahead into uncharted territories. I am no Elon Musk (in more ways than this, quite obviously), and while I can take small baby steps towards some unknown future, aside from deciding to get married 37 years ago on a prayer and a whim, I really don’t embrace change that well. This is true in almost all aspects of my life, and I suspect it might be true for most of you, too.

This past week we had a shul meeting, and there was some talk at the meeting about moving forward with a rabbinic search. When I read the parsha in preparation for today, I immediately thought of the shul meeting and some of the angst that seemed present. So many of us are frightened about moving towards a new vision in any way, whatever that vision may be – we like to keep the status quo.

Turning back to Shelach and those spies and their fears, I think that in some ways, they were between a rock and a hard place. The future in Canaan looked terrifying, but

staying put was not what God wanted, even though it must have felt pretty comfortable and even idyllic. The Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Schneerson, pointed this out. He noted that, in the wilderness, the Israelites lived in close and continuous proximity to God. They drank water from a rock. They ate manna from heaven. They were surrounded by the Clouds of Glory. Miracles accompanied them along the way. But in Canaan, they would have to fight wars, plough the land, plant seed, gather harvests, create and sustain an army, an economy and a welfare system. They would have to do what every other nation does: live in the real world of empirical space. According to the Rebbe, they feared success, not failure. They didn't think they wouldn't be able to defeat those giants; they simply feared giving up the lovely status quo, with a God close by in the wilderness.

It's so very hard to give up what we feel comfortable with. It's so easy to think back on times that weren't so very good, and think only of the positive moments in an effort to avoid the future.

So far, we've looked at two forms of fear: the obvious fear of failing at an endeavor, and fear of success, in that we fear giving up what has become comfortable and sense there is no going back if we succeed. There is one other form of fear of success that is suggested in Shelach.

Success brings new responsibilities, expectations on the part of ourselves and others that may be challenging to meet. Personally, or as a community, we fail to become what we might become because we lack faith in ourselves. At the end of the scouts' negative report, they rely upon a rather famous metaphor: they say that "we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them." Rabbi Danny Moss, a reform rabbi originally from Chicago, observes that, despite that language, the scouts really have no way to know what the inhabitants of Canaan think of them. The Torah preserves no record of interaction of any kind. The scouts assume that because they *feel* tiny, weak, and scared next to the fortified city dwellers, that the city dwellers want to stomp them into oblivion, and the Israelites would never prevail. How easily they forget God's miracles; how readily they doubt. Rabbi Moss notes that, like so many of us, these

newly freed, freshly minted leaders unwittingly sabotage their own future, allowing their faith to become fear. Like all of us, they assume. They panic. Their failure is the failure to imagine.

This is how life often goes: we succeed, sometimes beyond our wildest dreams, and then we fall back into precisely the same routines we fought to overcome. We doubt ourselves and our ability to achieve new success. We think we are imposters. The spies in Shelach can teach us that the only ones who are enslaving us and keeping us doubting is ourselves. We are not grasshoppers unless we think we are.