



The Collective Conversation

Weekly Torah Essays from the
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community



Sefer Bamidbar

Parshat Sh'lach

Sivan 5781 / June 2021

This *dvar Torah* is in honor of Jonah's Bar Mitzvah

מזל טוב ♦ מזל טוב ♦ מזל טוב

From the entire Blechner family and the YIS community

Leadership in the Face of Adversity

By Elisha Blechner

At the beginning of this week's Torah reading, *Parshat Sh'lach*, we read about the 12 *Meraglim* sent by *Moshe* to "scout" out the land. *Hashem* tells *Moshe*, *שְׁלַח-לְךָ אַנְשִׁים*, *send men*, to scout the land. *Rashi* explains that the word *אַנְשִׁים*, *men*, refers to distinguished, important people. *Hashem* is telling *Moshe* to send the leaders of the tribes for this important mission. *Moshe* selects the *Rashei Bnei Yisrael*, *heads of the nation*, most likely, these people were not professional spies or members of the 'army' who would normally be sent to scout the land. What was the real mission of these leaders? Did *Hashem* really want a dossier of how to capture the land, or was there something else in mind by telling *Moshe* to choose the heads of the nation?

The late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *z"l*, offers an interesting explanation of the mission of the *Meraglim* based on the specific word that the Torah uses, *latur* meaning *to seek out the good*, rather than *lachpor* or *leragel*, meaning *to spy*. Perhaps this is why *Hashem* suggested using heads of the nation since he thought these leaders would understand their mission and come back with the correct report. We know from the story, 10 of the 12 return to report that *Bnei Yisrael* would not stand a chance against such an enemy in the land. According to Rabbi Sacks, these ten men who returned with a negative report completely misunderstood their mission! Despite their status as leaders of their communities, they were so overcome with fear they could not see past it: "and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight." They only saw obstacles and, as a result, came to the wrong conclusion. Their lack of belief in *Hashem* caused an entire generation to be punished and face death wandering in the desert.

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Turning the focus to *Calev* and *Yehoshua*, the only two of the twelve spies who showed true leadership and, therefore, the only ones who gave a positive report. According to Rabbi Sacks, "one of the fundamental tasks of any leader, from president to parent, is to give people a sense of confidence: in themselves, in the group of which they are a part, and in the mission itself. A leader must have faith in the people they lead, and inspire that faith in them."

Calev and *Yehoshua* told the nation that the conquest of the land was eminently achievable because *Hashem* was with them. They understood that even though the task seemed insurmountable, they needed to exude confidence, share the good things about the land, and remind the people that we have Hashem on our side and can accomplish whatever He commands us to do. However, the people did not listen. The voices of doubt and despair overtook *Calev* and *Yehoshua's* voices of confidence. While the rest of the generation was punished, these two leaders lived to enter the land.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused so much pain and suffering throughout the world. It is incredible to think that just 15 months ago, our lives were completely shut down. Shuls and schools were closed. We were unable to celebrate our *semachot* or mourn our tragedies together. Literally, our Jewish communal life came to a halt. While faced with all this adversity, we could have given up and accepted there was nothing we could do.

Lucky for us, our Jewish communal leaders took charge and showed their true leadership – our local day schools being the first schools in the country to shut down, were among the first to set up remote learning. Our shul moved to virtual minyanim, shiva calls, and *semachot* — until we once again were allowed to safely be together.

Whether it was the school principals, shul Rabbis, shul/school presidents, sisterhood, medical volunteers, lay leaders – these leaders looked past the adversity and the despair and displayed true leadership, like *Calev* and *Yehoshua*. They understood that with belief in Hashem we would get through the pandemic and come out stronger on the other side. As we slowly return to ‘normalcy,’ we must not forget these leaders and how much energy and time they put in over the past year to allow our Jewish communal life to continue and our kids' education to flourish even in challenging circumstances.

Elisha and Sara Blechner moved to the Young Israel of Scarsdale community in 2005 with an 18-month old daughter and the contents of a small one-bedroom apartment. Now with four children - Gabby, Ari, Jonah and Kira - who have grown up in the community and kept true to their Boston sports teams, they have been active members in the shul, taking on various leadership roles since moving in.

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Want to write or dedicate a Parsha essay?

Please contact Steve Smith at stevenjsmith@yahoo.com

The Collective Conversation is a project of the Young Israel of Scarsdale and the YIS Living Torah Fund

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