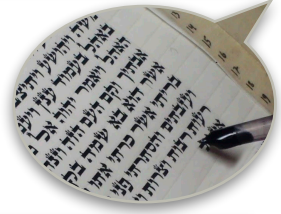




# The Collective Conversation

Weekly Torah Essays from the  
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community



Sefer Bamidbar

Parshat Sh'lach

Sivan 5783 / June 2023

## Being Close to God in Modern Society

By Eitan Katz

For this week's *Parsha, Sh'lach*, I read a beautiful interpretation of the story of the spies by the late great Rabbi Jonathan Sacks *zt"l*. The basic storyline is that while the Jews were wandering in the desert, *Moshe* told 12 spies — one from each of the tribes — to go forth to the land and bring back a detailed report. After 40 days, they returned, and their report confirmed the splendor of the land: "it is indeed flowing with milk and honey." This was followed by, as Rabbi Sacks puts it, "one of the most famous 'buts' in Jewish history." He is referring to the next *pasuk* where the spies continue their report: "But - the people who live there [in the land] are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of *Anak* ['the giant'] there." Two spies, *Caleb* and *Joshua*, urged everyone to ignore these worrisome details and continue towards the land. They were rewarded as the only two men from that generation to enter the land.

Rabbi Sacks asks a simple question: how could 10 of the spies return with a demoralizing report? This was the same group of people who witnessed God's might and miracles during the Egypt story. After all that, you'd think their faith would be impenetrable.

Rabbi Sacks explores this question through a lens provided by the *Lubavitcher Rebbe*.

The *Rebbe* suggests that the spies, all of whom were hand-selected for this mission, were not questioning God. They were actually afraid to succeed.

At face value, there is a lesson here about fearing success. How often do we see people self-sabotage to ensure they remain on the same comfortable path? People do this even to their own detriment because changing, growing, and evolving can be painful and challenging. But the *Rebbe* goes deeper and identifies a far more profound interpretation about the spies fearing success.

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He explains that the spies weren't afraid of losing a physical war but a spiritual one. The Jewish people were protected, fed, and in constant contact with the *Shechina* in the desert. It was easy to maintain their spiritual connection. What would happen should they need to focus so much of their effort and daily life on conquering land, generating food, and sustaining its people? Surely, their connection with *Hashem* would diminish.

This logic was faulty. As Rabbi Sacks points out, "One of the great differences between Judaism and other religions is that while others seek to lift people to heaven, Judaism seeks to bring heaven down to earth."

Our mission is to perpetuate Torah values in the world. To be the change we want to see, not to run from society but to be the model of society.

Hiding behind the comfort of *Hashem* in the desert could only be temporary. As Rabbi Sacks writes so beautifully, “Torah is about the responsibilities of freedom.”

Think about that ... *the responsibilities of freedom.*

Rabbi Sacks continues, “The Jewish task is not to fear the real world but to enter and transform it, healing some of its wounds and bringing to places often shrouded in darkness fragments of Divine light.”

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It’s easy to keep to yourself. It’s easy to be “too busy” to participate. It’s comfortable and safe to focus on yourself or your family and hope others pick up the slack. But that’s not what is going to drive our mission forward.

Our job is to internalize the core values of Torah and *Hashem*, and then perpetuate those values through meaningful and intentional action.

We have an amazing community - let’s devote more of our time and effort to make it even better and more infused with Torah.

We have amazing people — let’s spend time getting to know each other at a deeper level so we can create long-lasting, meaningful relationships that nourish us and our children for decades to come.

We have incredible leaders — let’s support them to the best of our abilities so we can continue to grow and expand the Jewish mission.

We’re also blessed to have freedom. And Torah is about the responsibilities of freedom.

Let’s not take the easy way out.

Eitan is a Young Israel of Scarsdale newcomer, Jonny and Joseph’s father, and Ayelet’s husband. Thanks to the Collective Conversation team for this opportunity!

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