

## Congregation Beth Elohim Pride D'Var Torah by [Joanna Ware](#)

Sh'lach 5779 - Numbers 13:1-20

In this week's [Parsha](#)<sup>1</sup>, we read the story of the scouts sent to survey the land of Canaan, which God has promised to the Israelites. Scouts are sent from each tribe, and when they return, they deliver their report. The land is bountiful, they say, it flows with milk and honey. BUT - and this is important, the scouts tell the Israelites that the people who live there are too powerful; that they are giants, and the Israelites felt like grasshoppers in comparison; they were sure, said the scouts, that to the giants they must look like grasshoppers. What they are saying is, effectively: "We've come this far and we've been set up. We can't win this fight."

There are two people who disagree: Caleb and Joshua. They try to convince the people that this fight is winnable; Caleb reminds the Israelites of the miracles G-d performed for them, of how far they've come. But the Israelites are totally overcome with fear and doubt, their hope - their faith - has been poisoned by the reports from the other scouts.

God gets angry, and threatens to destroy the Israelites. Moses pleads the people's case, and God relents - kind of. She doesn't kill all of the Israelites right there, but she does punish them, saying that none of the Israelites who have seen her power and still doubt will enter this land. EXCEPT for Caleb and Joshua, and the Israelite children.

And in particular, God says, Caleb will be permitted to enter the land, and his descendants will possess it:

עֵקֶב הַיַּיְתָה רוּחַ אַחֵרֶת עִמּוֹ

*ekev hayitah ruach acheret imo*

because there was a different spirit within him

So. What does this mean?

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<sup>1</sup> Numbers 13:1-20

First I want to look at this phrase - רוּחַ אַחֵרֶת - often translated as “different spirit” or even “another spirit”. But the word אַחֵרֶת or אַחֵר can also be translated as outsider or foreigner, and as strange. How might this phrase settle differently in our mouths if we think of it as an “outsider’s spirit”? What are the ways of knowing that may be unlocked from the perspective of an outsider? How is a *ruach acheret* a certain kind of strange – or queer – spirit?

In a [midrash](#)<sup>2</sup>, Rava teaches us that when the scouts arrived in Hebron, Caleb separated himself from the group and went to the the Ma’arat HaMachpelah - the tomb of ancestors. Remember that Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are all buried in Hebron. So Caleb prays to our ancestors to give him the courage and ability to separate himself from the counsel of the other scouts. It’s interesting, and I think noteworthy, that this Midrash doesn’t say that Caleb prays to God. No, Caleb prays to the ancestors, and his prayer was answered, it is taught, by the רוּחַ אַחֵרֶת - *outsider spirit* - within him.

Each of these ancestors was, in their own way, an outsider. In particular, Abraham and Sarah were the first to separate themselves from their families of origin, in pursuit of what they believed, what they knew to be true within themselves and in the world.

ALSO! The Rabbis teach us that [Abraham and Sarah were \*tumtumim\*](#)<sup>3</sup>, or alternatively that [Sarah was \*aylonit\*](#)<sup>4</sup> - both of these are categories of sexual difference, distinct from *zekhar* or *nekeva* - male and female, respectively. While these terms do not map neatly onto the ways we understand gender and sexual diversity today, they are certainly considered a form of difference - of queerness - that sets these ancestors apart.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Sotah 34b:7

<sup>3</sup> Yevamot 64a:9

<sup>4</sup> Yevamot 64b:2

<sup>5</sup> For more on the 6 different categories of sex/gender in Jewish sacred texts, see: <http://www.sojournsd.org/blog/sixgenders>

And it is to these queer ancestors that Caleb turns for guidance and fortitude and - I think - a bit of inspiration and imagination.

When Caleb eventually makes his report, there are two aspects of his approach that I think are noteworthy:

The first is that he attempts to remind the people of their faith, but he does so by describing the acts of unimaginable wonder that they've experienced; he pulls them back to the moments when G-d worked in ways that expanded their imagination, and invites them to imagine an alternative future is possible.

[Midrash Tanchuma](#)<sup>6</sup> teaches us that God's anger with the scouts is not on account of their fear. When the scouts report "We looked like grasshoppers in our own eyes." "This I can overlook" God says, but when they say "And so we looked in their eyes" - "Here I am angry!" Did you know how I made you look in their eyes? Who told you that you didn't look like angels in their eyes?"

Again, the issue is not with their fear - that is human, and understandable - it is with the ways in which their imagination is limited, and in that limitation, they limit the imagination of the other. As the scholar Avivah Zornberg teaches, "What God is particular about is preserving the sense of difference and therefore the 'possibility of the possibility.'" Here, in the Tanchuma passage, God is angered at their "fatal constriction of imaginative possibility."<sup>7</sup>

And so we learn, imagination is a necessary ingredient for liberation.

Secondarily, Caleb foregrounds desire. In this moment of intense crisis, the people are spiraling with fear and hopelessness and אונט - faithlessness, and in responding to them, Caleb and Joshua don't offer a strategic military argument - as one might imagine

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<sup>6</sup> Midrash Tanchuma, Sh'lach 7:1

<sup>7</sup> Zornberg, Avivah Gottlieb; *Bewilderments: Reflections on the Book of Numbers*, 2015, pg 122

- but instead they evoke the language of longing and desire. “If God desires us, God will bring us to this land and give it to us, the land flowing with milk and honey.”

The Sefat Emet - a Hassidic Torah Commentary - repeatedly translates Joshua and Caleb’s words “If God desires us...” as “All depends on Israel’s desire.”<sup>8</sup> For God, it is not enough to fear God’s power, the people must also acknowledge their longing, their desire, for God’s love. That is what unlocks the divine covenant, unlocks possibility and imagination and hope and redemption. To acknowledge desire is acute vulnerability, and the sign of trust and faith that God sees is missing among the Israelites.

So what we have, this week, is a few key ingredients for our path toward liberation:

1. A different spirit – *ruach acheret* - a queer spirit, unlocked by looking to our ancestors who were themselves outsiders.
2. Prophetic imagination – the ability and willingness to keep reaching for possibility, including the potential and possibilities present in our “enemies”
3. Desire as a central ingredient for liberation; without it, we cannot tap in to the longing, vulnerability, imagination, *ruach acheret*, and hope that are necessary to bring us into the promised land.

I can’t imagine a better *parsha* for Pride.

Our *parsha* this week is reminding us that queer imagination is a necessary ingredient for liberation; the capacity to dream into being something that has not previously existed; to think beyond the frameworks we’ve been offered, to turn them upside down, inside out, and to see differently, as an outsider. This is the queer lens, and the promise of the queer imagination.

This is the prophetic spirit and vision of [Marsha P Johnson](#) & [Sylvia Rivera](#) & [Stormé Delarverie](#). These queer ancestors - the courageous instigators of the Stonewall Rebellion that we are marking this week with Pride - weren’t just fighting \*against\*

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<sup>8</sup> Zornberg, Avivah Gottlieb; *Bewilderments: Reflections on the Book of Numbers*, 2015, pg 144

oppression, though they were certainly experiencing oppression and violence on a daily basis. But they were fighting \*for\* a vision of possibility that stretched beyond the limits of society's collective imagination. They were outsiders – gender rebels and queers, trans women and drag queens and butches and sex workers – pushed to the edges of “polite” society, and acutely vulnerable.

And these contemporary queer ancestors had what Caleb has:

- A ruach acheret, a queer, outsider's spirit – the kind ofchutzpah and knowing and vision that comes as a result of viewing the world from the margins and the balcony, the wisdom of distance and removal
- Prophetic imagination – the willingness and ability to imagine an entirely different world, and the faith that it can come into being.
- Desire and longing, and the refusal to dismiss the power of desire and all it contains to bring forth liberation.

The history we celebrate at Pride is not a story of assimilation, or timidity, or incremental change; it is the courage of ancestors who - because of their lived experiences and marginalization - were able to see things differently, to imagine alternatives obscured to others by fear and by comfort with the status quo.

We celebrate faith, yes, but not a flattened faith that things will just work out, rather it is a faith that another world is possible, that - despite the myriad forces that will rise up against us - we have a vision of a better world and that we can bring it forth. In the words of our queer Chicana ancestor, the writer and activist Cherríe Moraga: “I am not talking here about some lazy faith, where we resign ourselves to the tragic splittings in our lives with an upward turn of the hands or a vicious beating of our breasts. I am talking about believing that we have the power to actually transform our experience, change our lives, save our lives. It is the faith of activists I am talking about.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> “Preface” by Cherríe Moraga; Anzaldúa, Gloria & Moraga, Cherríe, eds. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, 1981, pg xviii

Rabbi Mike asked me to speak about what Pride means to me. THIS is what Pride is about, to me. It's about recognizing and carrying forward the spirit of historic resistance to homophobia and transphobia, to violent erasure and being told from all sides that our lives and our dignity don't matter.

But it's about more than resistance. It is also about celebrating a prophetic queer imagination. It is about bringing a queer lens to the world; a lens that questions what has been and what is considered normal, and about the willingness to dream into being a different kind of world and future. It is about celebrating our *ruach acheret* - our queer spirit - and the new forms of desire and imagination that we can call forth when we listen to that *ruach acheret* within each of us.

Thank you, and Shabbat Shalom.