

Shabbat shalom!

Have you ever wondered why the Israelites wandered the Desert for 40 years? Well, if you stick around you will find out in this week's Torah portion, Shlach Lecha. Some pretty crazy stuff happens.

We start out with the Israelites preparing to enter the Promised land that God promised to Abraham. They were all giddy, "Ooh we're going to the Promised land!" It seems like just yesterday that they were liberated from Egypt. Moses instructed 12 tribal leaders to go on a recon mission to scout out the Promised Land, and then report back. He instructs them to find answers to some important questions:

1. "Is the land barren or fertile?"
2. "Is the land populated or empty?" and,
3. "If the land is populated, are the people welcoming or hostile?"

After 40 days the 12 leaders return and give their report. The scouts declare that the Promised Land is a land flowing with milk and honey – and as proof of this they show a cluster of grapes so big it took 2 people to carry it!

However, here is where the proverbial cream cheese gets moldy! 10 of the 12 scouts come back with a very scary warning. They have really bad news about the Promised Land, they say:

1. The land is populated by giants,
2. The land consumes its inhabitants,
3. Compared with the people living in the Promised Land, The Jews are as tiny and helpless as grasshoppers!

On hearing all of this bad news the Israelites went into serious panic mode!!

However, the 2 other scouts, Joshua and Caleb, did not agree at all. They tried to calm the Israelites down. Josh and Caleb told the people about the positive aspects of the land, and that the Israelites could defeat the Promiselandians, and savor all of that delicious milk and honey. But nobody listened them.

The Israelites broke out in shouts of despair wishing that they could go back to Egypt to be slaves. This makes God very angry, of course. And maybe God's anger was justified. I mean, what would you do?

What if you led your people out of their miserable lives of hardship and slavery and then all they did to thank you was to complain and demand to go back into slavery! God totally loses it and comes **this close** to killing everyone!!

But like every great Jew, Moses argued with God. The good news is that Moses convinces God to forgive the Jews.

The bad news is that everyone who was liberated from slavery in Egypt is condemned to wander the desert for 40 years (with the exception of Joshua and Caleb).

Only the children born in the desert along with Joshua and Caleb will be allowed to enter the Promisedland. This is better than God killing everyone but still seems pretty harsh!

But this does not really make sense to me:

1. Why did God allow Moses instruct the people to spy on the land in the first place?
2. And, why does Moses even want his people to spy on their very own Promised Land?

Well, Rabbi Jay Michaelson (a contemporary Jewish thinker and scholar) explains that in this story the Jews are entering into a new phase of their journey – they need to learn how to do things for themselves. They are not babies anymore, and I think that Michaelson is right. They have been slaves for many generations and they really don't know how to function by themselves or make decisions for themselves. These people just had their freedom handed to them on a silver plate without an instruction manual. But this plan to teach the Israelites to think and act for themselves totally back-fired on Moses! The scouts come back from the recon mission completely terrified.

It seems to me that Moses had a pretty good plan. He was trying to give the Israelites an opportunity to think and act for themselves! But maybe it was too much and too soon. As I said.....it all back fired.

I think that there is something interesting going on here:

The scouts all saw exactly the same things while in The Promised Land. But, if this is the case then why did one group of scouts come back terrified while the other group (Joshua and Caleb) came back feeling very optimistic. How can this be?

I think that the answer has to do with perception.

For example, I look at a ginormous sandwich and think that I could never eat such a thing – and then my Dad would just eat the whole thing in just a few bites and then ask for another.

Or, I could look at the giants from the parsha and think, “no big deal, I could give them a beat down!” but, my brother Ben would be super duper scared and run away screaming!

So, one of the lessons that we can learn from today's parsha is about the importance of perception.....and.....self-perception.

There is a really important line in the story today, please try to remember it, the 10 scouts say:

“We felt like tiny grasshoppers. And that is what we were in their eyes.”

From this passage, I think that we find out 2 things:

1. The Israelites felt tiny and powerless against their enemies, and
2. The Israelites assumed, that because they felt tiny and powerless their enemies also saw them as tiny and powerless.

There was a Rabbi who lived around 200 years ago in Poland (Rabbi Menachem Mendel) who had something very interesting to say about this passage, he said:

“It is ok to say that you feel like a grasshopper in your own eyes. But, when you begin guessing what you might look like to someone else, you give them the power to define you.....this is the real error.....this is the real sin.”

I think that I agree with Rabbi Menachem but I don't think that I would really call it a “sin.”
But, the point is this: our perception becomes our reality.
Let me say this again: our perception.....becomes our reality.

For example, I can get pretty worked up about school and grades and homework and get really anxious – and, the more I think about the amount of work and tests and teachers and everything – I get crazy.

But once I realize that it is really not sooo much work, I can calm myself down.

Once I get started on my work, I can see that each assignment isn't so long or so hard. And I discover that my perception of what I had to do was misleading. This experience helps me to see:

What was real and what was my fear taking over.

The other day, I went to buy this tallis with my dad. There was a very wise man who was working at the store who kind of seemed like a Rabbi to me. While we were waiting, he gave me a little d'var (and he didn't even charge us extra!).

He had an interesting view of today's parsha: I am paraphrasing here.

The scouts were all leaders of their tribes – they were good, honest, hardworking people. So, then why did they turn against Moses and against entering The Promised Land in the story?

It is because they were afraid that when they got to the Promised Land, they would be so busy working to build their new country that they wouldn't have enough time to devote themselves to the study of Torah. So, actually it wasn't a punishment for them after all. Wandering around the desert for an extra 40 years actually allowed them more time for the study of Torah.

Honestly: I don't buy it.....but it is an interesting analysis.

So I think that we learned some interesting things from today's Parsha. We learned that our perception of what we see can be misleading and send us down the wrong path.

The scouts and the Israelites seem to have learned this lesson the hard way! But I find this confusing and I wonder if you do, too.

There is an expression that I am sure you have heard: “Seeing is believing.” But for most of the scouts – what they saw and what they believed seemed to have misled them.

And now here is what you have been waiting for – the question!

1. If we cannot believe what we see is real, if our perception of what we see with our very own eyes can deceive us – then, what should we base our beliefs on? The Israelites had God actually telling them that what was “right” and “wrong” – but we are not so lucky.
2. And, second, what about you? Is there a time when your perception of what you actually saw misled you? How did you deal with that?

Thanks for listening. Shabbat Shalom.