

## The Eight Second Sermon

Shelach 2018

The Jewish Center

Rabbi Yosie Levine

Earlier this week, a boy from Wyoming named Shiva appeared in the Scripps National Spelling Bee in Maryland. He was asked to spell the word “Cholent.” When he asked for the definition, the judge said, “A Jewish Sabbath-day dish of slow-baked meat and vegetables.” Shiva then proceeded to correctly spell the word C-H-O-L-E-N-T and moved on the next round.

I reached out to him and asked if he would be available to proofread our Shabbat Bulletin. He said he would have been happy to, but Chabad got to him first.

And getting places first is actually the theme that I want to talk about this morning.

To the story of the Meraglim, the Torah appends an epilogue. We know nothing about its size or makeup, but a group known by Chazal as the Maapilim, decides to take matters into its own hands. Upon hearing the devastating sentence issued by Hashem in response to the spies, these Israelites throw caution to the wind and decide to storm the gates. Moshe warns them that they cannot enter the Promised Land without divine sanction. But the Torah tells us:

וַיַּעֲפְלוּ, לְעֵלוֹת אֶל-רֹאשׁ הַהָר

They stubbornly press forward nonetheless.

וַיִּרְדּוּ הָעַמִּלְקִי וְהַכְּנַעֲנִי, הַיֹּשֵׁב בְּהַר הַהוּא; וַיִּכּוּם וַיַּכְתּוּם, עַד-הַחֲרָמָה .

And the inhabitants of the land summarily cut them down.

As if the central narrative of our Parsha weren't tragic enough, these obdurate Israelites add insult to injury and even more lives are lost.

So who are they and what is this story about?

It's important to remember that the fate of the Jews in the aftermath of the spies takes two very different forms. For those above the age of twenty, it means death in the desert. For those below the age of twenty, the punishment isn't death – just a delay: forty years of wandering in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land.

Most commentators suggest the Maapilim belong to the first group. On this interpretation, the risk seems almost justified. Facing the prospect of never making it to the Land of Israel, they reason, why not take a chance? Maybe it's the wrong calculus, but psychologically, it's relatively easy to understand. After all, what have they got to lose?

But Rashi opens the door to another possibility. The Maapilim arise early in the morning and they declare:

הֲגִנּוּ, וְעָלִינוּ אֶל-הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר-אָמַר ה'

*Here we are and we will ascend to the place about which Hashem said...*

But there's an ellipsis in the text. They don't complete their thought. So Rashi fills in the blank and finishes their sentence:

אָפּ-אַמַר ה' לַתְּתָהּ לָנוּ

The place that Hashem said... He will give to us.

Those above the age of twenty could never have uttered such a sentence. Only a moment before, Hashem had said in no uncertain terms that they would die in the desert and would never inherit the land.

I want to argue that Rashi is subtly suggesting that the Maapilim belong to the second group. On this reading, their actions are even bolder and more audacious. These are Israelites who will assuredly live to enter the Promised Land; they just can't bear the thought of having to wait so long.

This coda, then, is a cautionary tale. It's not a calculated risk nor is it a last ditch effort on the part of a hopeless people with nothing to lose. These are men standing at the doorstep of history who need only wait for the passage of time. Any rational decision-maker would know that subverting Hashem's express plan would be a mistake. But the Maapilim have lost their capacity for deliberation. These are the consequences, the Torah tells us, when people act impetuously.

We've seen this play before:

- It's the story of Chava in the garden.
- It's the story of Esav returning from the field.
- And it's the story of the Maapilim.

The failure to act with mindfulness always spells disaster.

Impulse control – the ability to wait and make conscious decisions – the capacity to be present in the moment – is a challenge the Torah highlights for us from the very beginning. But perhaps the problem has never been as manifest as in our generation. Distractions are so ubiquitous we get distracted on our way to distractions.

One recent study places our average attention span at eight seconds.  
Where was I?

And everyone is grasping for a solution.

Let me share with you an excerpt from a letter written recently by one of my colleagues to the members of his shul in New Jersey:

“Effective immediately... the entry of cell phones into shul is banned. Signs will be posted advising people of this change and boxes will be placed outside each davening location allowing each bearer to place their turned-off phone inside before entering the shul to daven. Certainly it is preferable that phones be kept at home... but they really have no place in shul.”

While I don't foresee a ban like this coming to the Upper West Side anytime soon, I can certainly appreciate the frustration. I think we all can.

There are no sacred spaces any more. It goes without saying that people are on their phones at business meetings and at the dinner people; but people are also on their phones at funerals and weddings. When I was growing up, I had a teacher who used to ask for our undivided attention. It's an expression that's fallen into disuse because no one believes for a second that our attention could be anything but divided.

So maybe shul really is the time and place to think about re-orienting and re-wiring.

We have so few opportunities in life to meaningfully connect to other people. If before we checked our phones, we were forced to consciously rank order our priorities, it would be simple:

- What's more important: A eulogy being delivered by a beloved friend or an email from a client?
- What's more important: A conversation with my kids or a text message from Zales?
- What's more important: Davening to Hashem or the score in the Yankees game?

The trouble is we've stopped making conscious decisions. We pick up our phones simply because we've habituated ourselves to doing so. And the language of addiction is certainly not inappropriate.

Of course there's nothing uniquely Jewish about this problem. Citizens of the world will eventually have to adapt and develop new social and legislative norms. It took a number of years, but now texting or talking on your phone while driving is illegal. We can't predict what the future of these technologies will be. But we do have the Torah and its values to help us navigate the challenges in the meantime.

I confess that choosing to speak about this topic feels a little like re-arranging the deck chairs on the *Titanic*. I'm as guilty as the next guy. We're not banning phones from shul and our addiction to technology is only going to become increasingly more problematic in the years to come.

But I'm not willing to give up so easily. Judaism has always been counter-cultural. And we do have a contribution to make to this discussion.

So allow me to make three observations:

First, let's have the conversation. We may not have the solutions, but talking about the challenge can only help. Part of what sealed the fate of the Maapilim was their inability to listen. If we can pull our earbuds out long enough, who knows what we might come up with?

Second, the Torah recognizes that we need reminders and cues. That's why our parsha concludes with the Mitzvah of Tzitzit. It's hard to walk through life with sufficient mindfulness to make good decisions – or to make decisions at all.

וְהָיָה לָכֶם, לְצִיצֵת, וּרְאִיתֶם אֹתוֹ וַיִּזְכְּרֶתֶם אֶת-כָּל-מִצְוֹת יְהוָה, וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם; וְלֹא-תִתְּוּרוּ אֶתְרֵי לְבַבְכֶם, וְאֶתְרֵי עֵינֵיכֶם, אֲשֶׁר-אִתָּם זָנִים, אֶתְרֵיהֶם.

Literally or figuratively, the more Jewish signs and symbols we have in our lives, the greater our chances of living more consciously.

Finally, it's clear that the world's appreciation for Shabbat has only gone up with the advent of each of new technological marvel. It's the great reminder that it is possible to exercise human agency even in fields where it seems like we have less and less control. If society has been slow to fashion the guidelines that will help us retain healthy human relationships, we need to create the rules. Let's pick a few times or a few places where technology is verboten and try living in the moment.

Today we're blessed to be celebrating Laila's bat mitzvah. Laila: you're a very bright and talented young woman. And maybe you'll be the one to solve these challenges for your generation. Your parents have modeled for you all the right values and we have every confidence that you are going to use them in the service of Hashem and the Jewish people.

The fact that we even have a spelling bee these days gives me reason for hope. We still have the capacity to extract from the modern world all the blessings it has to offer. But we have to be mindful of the curses. And if this sermon was too long or too old fashioned, you can always follow me on Twitter...