

## **Incurable Optimism**

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### **Shelach 5781**

In my sermon last week, I professed my strong belief that the Jews have no other faith groups or communities upon whom they can rely as friends, and that there is no one who truly wishes us well. I thought that even a simple study of Jewish history would prove the correctness of this assertion, and indeed, many of you came over and thanked me for validating the feelings of insecurity and existential loneliness you have been experiencing of late. Some people, however, took strong yet respectful exception to these remarks. After all, even in our darkest times, there were those who were willing to risk it all to save Jews, and today, there are plenty of non-Jews who, for any number of reasons, support Jews and advocate for Israel. Fascinatingly, those who took exception represented both the far right and the far left of the political spectrum of our community! One person told me that an attitude in which we have no friends, and that everyone hates us, is a really dark way to go through life. I've been thinking about that quite a bit. Not about the sermon itself, or the subject matter- but about this reaction, which raises an important question. Is it better to go through life as a pessimist, or as an optimist? I think this essential question lies at the heart of this week's Torah reading.

The narrative that forms the backbone of this morning's Torah reading is well known to us. Moshe sends spies to investigate the land of Israel, to identify its weaknesses and strengths

and strategize about the best ways to conquer it. The verse stresses that these men were כְּלָמִים and אנשים ראשי בני ישראל המדה: they were all men of repute, of sterling character, who were fitting to be the leaders of their tribes. With this in mind, a comment from the Zohar requires some explanation. The Zohar suggests that the spies decided together that if they delivered a positive report and then subsequently entered the land of Israel, they would sacrifice their roles as ראש, as a head, and instead would become a זנב, a tail. A simple reading of this statement paints these men as conspirators who were willing to sacrifice the Jewish future if it meant endangering their prestige. This is perplexing; if indeed these were men of great character, why would they do such a thing?

Rav Yehuda Aryeh Leib Alter, the second Gerrer Rebbe, elaborates in his commentary the *Sfat Emet*. Far from being concerned with their own *personal* prestige, they were concerned about the *spiritual* status of the Jewish people. In the desert, they benefited from miraculous sustenance; all their spiritual and physical needs were taken care of and no effort was required in the process. But when they would enter the land of Israel, everything would change; they would be responsible for their own material needs, and would have to balance that with a committed and fulfilling religious life- a complex endeavor at which they would surely fail. Out of concern for the Jewish people, they presented the facts in as fearsome a way as possible, so they would lose heart and remain in the desert, under God's protective clouds.

When presented in this way, the spies seem well-intentioned. Why, then, are they punished so severely? And if the Israelites were just reacting to their tone and content, why were they also punished so robustly? I'd like to suggest that the *meraglim* had one character flaw that had to be dealt with and uprooted: they were pessimistic. They believed they would never attain the kind of spiritual heights under trying circumstances as they did in the desert; they were convinced that the glory days of the Jewish people were drawing to a close, never to be replicated. God showed them that their pessimism was a self-fulfilling and self-defeating prophecy- but he didn't just leave it there. To show the importance and the power of optimism, He gave several mitzvot to the Jewish people immediately thereafter: libations over sacrifices, the mitzvah of Challah, and the procedure for what happens when everyone follows a mistaken ruling of the Sanhedrin. God was telling us that there *will* be opportunities for celebration in the form of joyous sacrifices, and we will rejoice by pouring wine, the beverage synonymous with celebration, all over them. We *will* enter the land of Israel, and we *will* experience bounteous harvests. Our children *will* follow in God's ways and be committed Jews, and when they put bread on their tables, they will sanctify it by taking Challah. It is such an easy mitzvah, too- you don't even have to kill anything. Is there any smell more evocative of Eretz Yisrael than the aroma of freshly baked crusty water Challot wafting through the streets of Yerushalaim starting Thursday afternoons? And we *will* have a robust religious life, including a system of principled religious leadership. But leaders sometimes make mistakes, as the experience with the *meraglim* showed. Rather than completely disassembling over it, though, there is a way to deal with it, and move forward.

Those who told me that last week's sermon evinced a dark attitude, and that having such an attitude must be a difficult way to go through life, were not wrong. It is something I am working on myself. God knows that in today's world, and certainly in the past 15 months, there is plenty that has left us pessimistic, fatalistic and cynical, struggling to find rays of sunshine breaking through turbulent skies. But optimism is not the Pollyannaish denial of present difficult circumstances, or of the inevitability of future disappointment and challenges. It is, instead, the choice to believe that life holds promise and positivity even if that means occasional disappointment and sadness, and even if we are *presently* weathering challenges. It is also the belief that when we are faced with adversity, we will be able to weather it to get to the other side. If that sounds a lot like resiliency, there is a reason: the two are closely related. Indeed, Martin Seligman, the father of "positive psychology," asserted that the key to resiliency, to being able to bounce back from life's setbacks, is cultivating a sense of optimism<sup>1</sup>.

In thinking about optimism and resilience, and seeking models to emulate in my own behavior, I find myself thinking about Rabbi Wolk- today's chosson. Over the past 16 months, Rabbi Wolk has been a paragon of these two attributes. We mourned with him and his family after Annette's untimely passing, and then we watched as he redoubled his efforts to serve our community, as he has done with distinction for decades. Rabbi Wolk taught us about optimism and resilience, because in the midst of a world roiled by uncertainty and loss, he strengthened his ties with his community, and showed hope for happier days ahead as he and

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<sup>1</sup> <https://hbr.org/2011/04/building-resilience>

Julie found one another. What a blessing for us as well, that in the same way that we mourned Annette publicly before the pandemic, we are able to join together now that it has, thank God, subsided, and wish Rabbi Wolk and Julie all the best as they begin the next chapter of their lives. Normally, in speaking at an *aufruf*, I would use this opportunity to give some marital advice to the *chosson* and the *kallah*. In this case, I look to the *chosson* for marital advice! All I can say- all *we* can say- is that we pray that this union is a source of blessing, of comfort, of optimism for them and their families and are grateful that we will have the honor of sharing it with them.

Let us learn from the *meragelim* and strengthen our optimism muscles; amidst a scary world, there is still a great deal to be positive about. There is finally a government in Israel, and maybe it will bring together sides that previously showed enmity toward one another. I'd say stranger things have happened, but I haven't seen too many! More and more Americans are getting vaccinated and life, at least in our corner of the world, is returning to normal. We are finally able to go back to shul- and soon, enter Israel as we please, with God's help. We are able to celebrate *smachot* together, may they continue. And may we all live lives filled not with darkness, but with light.