

Parashat Shlach Lecha Sermon by Rabbi Cooper

“The Faith of Joshua and Kalev”

June 14, 2014 / 16 Sivan 5774

What does it mean to have faith? As a newly minted rabbi, in the first community in which I served, I became an active participant in the local Ministerium, the group of Priests, Ministers and Rabbis which convened on a monthly basis. The topics of our meetings often focused mostly on matters of religion and the larger community. Occasionally, however, we would discuss matters of theology. It was in the context of that conversation in which I first encountered Evangelical Christians. The Evangelical minister was quite adamant about the literal truth of everything in the Bible. For the rest of my colleagues, his dismissal of any view other than his own was a source of tension.

During one heated discussion, however, I saw a crack in his rigid and unyielding façade. I don't remember the specifics of the question, but the questioner asked the Evangelical to reconcile two seemingly contradictory passages. The Evangelical sat quietly. “If there is no way you can reconcile these passages, does that not prove that the Bible cannot always be taken literally?” inquired the other. Again, the Evangelical sat, searching, so it seemed, for an answer. After a moment he said: “You are right. There is a contradiction which I cannot reconcile. But I have faith that there is a way to understand both verses. I simply do not yet know how.”

As I followed the conversation, I was impressed by the Evangelical's humility, admitting that he had no answer to his conundrum. But, at that moment, I admired his faith, even more. After the meeting, I approached the minister and asked: “How are you able to have such faith?” He replied, “It takes work.”

I had never before thought about faith as something to work on. It seemed to me, until that point, that either you have faith or you don't, but the minister's comment made me think again. Perhaps faith is not a yes-or-no proposition. Perhaps, faith is something that we strengthen and develop with practice. When that which we believe is tested or challenged, perhaps the test or challenge can be re-examined so that faith can remain. And a faith, challenged yet sustained is, I suspect, a stronger faith. I believe that this is exactly what happened in the story of this week's *parasha*, *Shlach Lecha*.

Moses gathers representatives from each tribe, twelve in all, to enter the Land of Canaan on a reconnaissance mission. He provides specific questions to which he would like answers. The spies, therefore, knowing the scope and purpose of their mission, cross into the Land. Traveling together, they see cities and inhabitants. They view a land of plenty and even return from their mission with agricultural samples. Nevertheless, there are two very different reports given. One report reflected

the view of the majority, endorsed by ten of the 12 spies. The minority report was given by Kalev and Joshua.

In the first report we learn that the Land, indeed, is “flowing with milk and honey.” But, the report continued on a different note: the people there are aggressive...the cities are well-fortified... and the land consumes its inhabitants. All the men we saw were huge/like giants” (Num.13:28 – 33). The recommendation of these spies: We should not try to conquer this land. The remaining two scouts, Joshua and Kalev saw the same land but returned with a very different recommendation: Despite the obstacles which have been noted, we must go into the land. And we will prevail.

The Torah records that God was furious with the first report. “I shall put an end to this nation with its short memory.” Moses intercedes. The “evil” spies are punished, along with the rest of the rest of the people. Their punishment: they shall remain in the desert and shall not enter the land. Only the next generation will enter.

What I find most puzzling about this story, however, is that the spies who gave the majority report were punished at all. They went, as asked, into the land to bring back a report, which they did. Why are the two who delivered the minority report, Joshua and Kalev, exonerated while the others condemned? Why kill the messengers? Perhaps the answer lies not in their doubts about their own abilities, but in their doubts about God.

When recounting their adventures in the Land, the spies offer a tendentious report:

Lo nuchal la'alot el ha'am ki chazak hu mimenu.

We are not able to go up against the people for they are stronger than we. (13:31)

Commenting on this verse, Rashi forgoes the literal approach and offers a midrashic interpretation (citing *Sotah*: 35a)

Kiviyachol k'lapei ma'alah amru.

The spies rallied against God.

Rashi suggests here that the word “mimenu” should not be translated as the context might suggest. *Mimenu* can mean either “than we” or “than him.” That is, the spies, according to Rashi were saying not that they (the giants) are stronger than we. Rather, he understands the word “*mimenu*” to mean “as Him:” The giants in the land are stronger than God. And here, Rashi reveals the central problem of the spies. They were concerned less about their own ability than they were about God’s power. Theirs was not a doubt regarding their physical ability. Theirs was a crisis of faith in God.

Rashi is not just explaining to us how to understand the punishment given to the ten spies. Here he speaks to us about an issue with which we can all (including Rashi) relate. In the face of obstacles we encounter, when our burden seems too great, when our pain or fear seems unbearable, our faith is challenged: "if there is a God, this would not happen." Doubting God is understandable, sometimes justifiable and something we all do. It takes no training or effort to doubt our beliefs. In fact, it is, in some ways, easier to say, in the language of the Talmud, "*Leit din v'leit dayan*," there is not justice nor is there a Judge. Believing in God, on the other hand, is difficult at times and, as the Evangelical minister taught, it takes work.

Several years ago, in an interview about his writing, the novelist Wally Lamb reflected on the two faith motifs which he intertwines and balances in his novel, *The Hour I First Believed* (Harper Press, 2008). There are parts of his novel, he states, in which faith must contend with the randomness that rules human existence. At other times, however, he explores the possibility of an ordering presence in the world. And these two aspects of faith are both present in the image of a maze which he includes in his novel. When one is lost in a maze, the world can seem confounding, nonsensical and impossible to navigate. And because we are blocked at every turn, we can find neither order nor escape. But if and when we can rise above the maze, we can perceive the logic and order of the maze.

When one is lost in a maze, one perceives obstacles all around. Logic and reason cannot provide a path out. But if one can ascend, if one can go up, above the maze, one may be able to find the way out which otherwise we could not find. And learning to ascend, to look from a different perspective, to believe that there is a way to prevail is the work of faith.

Faith can be that aspect of our lives which gives us courage in the face of danger, strength when we feel weak and guidance when we feel lost. Faith need not be blind, the kind of faith that encourages us to take unnecessary risks. But, if we can rise up, above the situation at hand, in times of need, if we can learn to look from above and see things from a different perspective, if we can ascend, '*alo na'aleh*' above the maze of life. We may find a different path. We may discover that which had previously eluded us.

When the majority of the spies stood before Moses and Israelites, their report included indisputable facts. That report, however, lacked the faith needed to see the possibilities. The report of Joshua and Kalev, using the same facts, was accepted, not because of its optimism but because of its perspective: this challenge is not too great because God will be with us. This challenge is not too great for God. Their report was not naïve. From where they viewed the Land, they could surely identify numerous obstacles and challenges. But, in the report of Joshua and Kalev, their

perspective enabled them to see the land from above. In the land of Canaan, with God's help, they would ascend and prevail.

That Evangelical minister taught me that faith does not come on its own. Faith is found by those who believe that there is a different perspective from which to view our lives. Faith comes only after we choose to believe. Faith helps when it motivates us to find the possible in the midst of that which seems impossible. Faith gives us a reason to hope rather than an excuse to despair. And, I believe, that was the faith of Joshua and Kalev.