

Shabbat Sh'lach L'kha
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Rabbi Susan Miller Rheins

Several times a week, around 7 in the morning, I receive a phone call from our son Sam in Jerusalem. For nine months, he's been interning at the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He works in the Media and Public Affairs Division. Sam's primary responsibilities include filming and editing videos about Israel and creating pamphlets that are supposed to be informative but unbiased. That's not an easy task in a country that rarely gets a break from prejudiced media coverage.

Yesterday, Sam traveled with an international press corps to the border between Israel and Gaza. He was there not only to see firsthand the ongoing conflict that has been headline news for weeks, but also to observe if and how the press spins the news. The group met with several people. They met with an Israeli farmer whose livelihood literally has been burned to the ground by kites sent over the border from Gaza fitted with flammable materials. They met with an IDF officer who is collaborating with civilian drone racers to intercept the flammable kites and helium balloons before they land on Israeli soil. And they met with an Israeli firefighter whose brigade responds to these malicious acts of arson as best they can.

Sam was shocked by the inanity of some of the journalists' questions. One asked the farmer how he felt about his fields being destroyed. Another asked the IDF officer if Israel, a world leader in High-Tec innovation, doesn't have the military

expertise to detect kids' toys disguised as incendiary devices. A third asked the firefighter what they do when they receive the report of a fire.

What responses could these reporters possibly have expected? That the farmer danced the *horah* around the campfire ablaze in his yard? That the IDF isn't all it's cracked up to be? That the firefighters live for the moment they can suit up and play super hero? Obviously, the reporters were trying to elicit certain responses. They wanted the farmer to denounce Hamas and the Palestinians, accuse them of being terrorists and ruining his life. They wanted the IDF commander to admit that Hamas has the upper hand in this raging conflict. They wanted the firefighter to say that Israel can't keep up with the infernos, that Hamas is well on its way to successfully destroying the State of Israel by burning it to the ground.

According to Sam, that's not what this press corps got. Instead, the farmer shared with them his grief, not about fields scorched, but about relationships destroyed. He described how in the past, Israelis and Palestinians would cross the border freely, how some of those people who live just beyond that wire fence in Gaza danced at his wedding. He described how he would go to their homes in Gaza, and visit their shops, and eat hummus in their restaurants. Yes, the farmer was devastated about his financial loss but, according to Sam, he was equally upset about how this conflict was vilifying people he considered friends.

The commander expressed profound gratitude that civilian drone enthusiasts are volunteering to enlist in the IDF's engineering corps as reservists, that they have the skill to down these incendiary devices within 40 seconds of detecting them. And the firefighter? He knew that he too was being set up. When asked what the firefighters do when they receive the report of a fire, he replied: "We go to put it out." Israelis love their land. Many Israelis are critical of their government, but they love their land. I have yet to meet an Israel who can't identify a tree or a plant, or is uncertain about which wildflowers and blossoms are edible. So rather than rant about Hamas as eco-terrorists, which would have been an accurate and justified response, he replied that as firefighters they have an obligation to protect the people and the land of Israel, so that's what they do. They do their job.

It's no secret that many people delight in exaggerating the truth. This week's Torah portion is a perfect example. In *Parashat Sh'lach L'kha*, God instructs Moses to send twelve emissaries, one from each tribe, to scout the land of Canaan. God says:

Go up there into the Negev and on into the hill country, and see what kind of country it is. Are the people who dwell in it strong or weak, few or many? Is the country in which they dwell good or bad? Are the towns they live in open or fortified? Is the soil rich or poor? Is it wooded or not? And take pains to bring back some of the fruit of the land (Numbers 13:17-20).

The scouts do their due diligence. They travel throughout the land. They sample its bounty. At the end of forty days, they return to the Israelite camp and share this report:

We came to the land you sent us to; it does indeed flow with milk and honey. However, the people who inhabit the country are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large" (Numbers 13:27-28).

Naturally the Israelites are frightened by this report. Their fears are enflamed by the perspective of ten scouts who add, "We cannot attack that people, for they are stronger than we" (Numbers 13:31).

Joshua and Caleb, however, have a different perspective, although they participated in the same reconnaissance mission. About the land, they declare: טוֹבָה הָאָרֶץ מְאֹד מְאֹד "It is an exceedingly good land!" To prove their point, they produce a luscious cluster of grapes suspended on a sturdy branch. Today this image serves as the symbol of Israel's Ministry of Tourism. Almost certainly, ten of the scouts exaggerated the dangers of entering the land of Canaan and two of the scouts exaggerated the blessings of the land.

This age-old art of exaggeration to ridiculous proportions, for good or bad, is rampant in modern society. We see it not just in the media, but in our daily interactions with family and friends, even in this sacred community. Stirring up controversy where none exists or minding other people's business for the sake of having something juicy to talk about isn't right. It's immoral and unethical.

For sure, legitimate controversies exist. For sure, there is good cause to be anxious and apprehensive in this problematic world. But to angle for a soundbite to turn into a sellable story, or to play telephone when it comes to peoples' lives by one-upping the message through elaboration and exaggeration, I don't want to go there.

When I spoke with Sam yesterday, he was concerned that none of the human-interest aspects of the stories shared with the press corps would make the news. There would be no reports about the farmer who, despite personal loss, still longs for peace with his Palestinian neighbors in Gaza. There would be no features about recreational drone racers coming to the aid of the IDF. There would be no pieces about Israeli firefighters using the country's scarcest commodity, water, to save the country. Well, Sam was wrong. Minutes after we ended our conversation, The Times of Israel published an article entitled "Israeli drones downed over 350 incendiary terror kites, balloons," complete with a video showing a drone snagging a kite in midair. Thankfully, someone among the group found something positive to report.

What Sam wasn't aware of during the media briefing was that the area in which they stood, on the border between Israel and Gaza, is the Eshkol Valley described in this week's Torah portion. Like the scouts sent by Moses to check out the land, Sam was sent by his supervisor to assess the situation down south and report back. (Of course, his was only a one-day trip, not a 40-day expedition.) Like the Israelites, Sam was unsettled by the facts on the ground, by

the disquiet of this conflict that escalates weekly with no foreseeable resolution. But my son is an optimist, so like Joshua and Caleb, he was heartened by Israel's constructive and innovative efforts to ensure the safety and welfare of all involved. He hoped that the international press would share these sentiments with the world, rather than images of bloodied terrorists storming the fence. I believe that Israel is an exceptionally good country, in Joshua and Caleb's words: טובה הארץ מאד מאד. Israel tries to do the right thing. It really does, but it's not always easy, especially when it's held to different and higher standards than other countries. Obviously, I don't live in Israel, so I do what I can from afar to protect it from hatemongers who use hyperbole and exaggeration to debase it. As a proud Zionist I speak out. And as a leader of this community, I do what I can to squash rumors and falsehood. I'm not one who thrives on stirring the pot. Each of us has a unique outlook, about the world at large and about goings-on right here at home. When we share our points of view, may we do so with discretion and with perception, knowing that our words surely impact the lives of others.