

A Weekly Message of Torah from Rabbi Rick Rheins
Shabbat Sh'lach L'kha 5780

A Brave Step Forward

This week's Torah portion, *Sh'lach I'khah* (Numbers 13:1-15:41), records one of the most difficult and disappointing periods in our ancestral history. In the second year after the Exodus and Egyptian slavery, the Children of Israel were on the boarder of the Promised Land. Moses decides to send representatives from each of the 12 tribes to scout out the land and report back to the people. All of the scouts confirmed that the Land of Israel, the land of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob, Rachel, Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah was indeed a land flowing with milk and honey. At last the caravan of refugees, recovering from generations of brutal slavery and already losing patience after months of trudging through the wilderness would come home. But that's not what happened.

Ten of the twelve scouts threw doubt and then fear into their report, undermining the homecoming:

"It's all for nothing because the people who inhabit the country are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large; moreover, we saw the Anakites there. Amalekites dwell in the Negev region; Hittites, Jebusites, and Amorites inhabit the hill country; and Canaanites dwell by the Sea and along the Jordan" (Num. 13:28-29).

As you can imagine, the Israelites began to raise a cry of concern.

Immediately, the remaining two scouts, Caleb from the tribe of Judah and Joshua from the tribe of Ephraim, tried to call the people.

Caleb hushed the people before Moses and said, "Let us by all means go up, and we are surely capable and worthy of our inheritance!" (Num. 13:30).

Unfortunately, hysteria and hyperbole are often added to the mix when contrasting views compete for the will of the people. The ten scouts who were against trying to enter the Promised Land decided to win the debate by scaring the people and playing on irrational fears:

They spread slanderous reports among the Israelites about the land they had scouted, saying, "The country that we traversed and scouted is one that devours its settlers. All the people that we saw in it are men of giant size; we saw the Nephilim there -- the Anakites are part of the Nephilim -- and we looked like grasshoppers to ourselves, and so we must have looked to them" (Num. 13:32-33).

Not only did they exaggerate their reports with tales of giants, they even spoke of the *Nephilim*, “the fallen ones,” mythological half angel half human super beings. Naturally, the people were so scared that they threatened Moses and many planned to run back to Egypt, choosing slavery over the frightening consequences of going forward. The resulting civil strife caused the Israelites to flounder for another 38 years in the wilderness until finally Joshua, who took the helm after Moses, led them into the Land of Israel.

We, too, are facing a time of upheaval. The COVID-19 pandemic has isolated us; parents and grandparents are not able to visit their children because of the mortal dangers. Businesses have shut, millions are out of work, bankruptcies and economic hardship are all around us. Synagogues, churches, non-profits, important organizations that are devoted to the welfare of the community are having to layoff valuable staff and plea for donations in valiant but desperate attempts to survive the storm.

As if a pandemic was not enough, the ugly demons of racism, bigotry and anti-Semitism are becoming more emboldened, taking advantage of the political strife and mean-spiritedness that has become the awful norm. Mind you, it may still get worse! Besides the fear of a “second surge” of COVID in the fall, we also are entering an election that could only bring out the worst in our leaders.

The Torah does not offer a rose colored portrayal of our ancestors or a happy ending for every conflict. No, it wants us to look at our ancestors and see ourselves; that we, too, are vulnerable to those who will manipulate us with fear and prejudice and lies. The Torah’s message is for us to keep our wits, keep our cool, keep our values, and keep our faith. Have faith, not that everything will always work out for the best. Because it doesn’t. Sometimes we fail, sometimes we lose, and sometimes unfairness and injustice hold

sway. Even still, keep the faith. Keep believing that each of our lives has meaning and purpose. Let no pedagogue, let no unruly mob, let no doomsayer rob us of our sense of dignity, self-esteem, and determination to live life with joy and love and to the fullness of our noblest values and principles.

It is true that some will succumb to the siren song of despair. Even our ancestors were vulnerable. And then, a new generation arose and they took the brave step forward; they believed in the Promised Land, they believed in the future, they believed in themselves. And so can we.

B'vrakhah, With blessings,

Rick

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