

## **D'var Torah – Shelach Lecha 5771**

**June 18, 2011**

***By Rabbi Maurice Harris***

This Shabbat we read from the parashah called Shelach Lecha, in the book of Numbers. A little over a year has passed since the Hebrews have escaped Egypt, and they've arrived close to the border of the Promised Land. God commands Moses to select a team of 12 leaders – one from each of the tribes – and assign them the mission of scouting out the Promised Land. They are to take a full tour of the land, and then return and make a report to Moses and the Israelites.

After 40 days surveying and investigating the land and its inhabitants, the team returns to the Israelite encampment in the wilderness of Paran. They've carried back samples of the land's incredible produce, including figs, pomegranates, and a cluster of grapes so large it had to be attached to a large pole and carried by two men.

The Israelites convene to hear the scouts give their report. That's when things turn disastrous, especially for Moses and his hope to lead these former slaves into the land God had promised to them going all the way back to Abraham.

The majority of the scouts offer a terribly demoralizing report. They start out on a positive note, describing the natural bounty of the land, but then they anxiously exclaim that the nations that live there are far too mighty and muscular to confront. There is no hope, they announce, in making an attempt to enter the land. It's a suicide mission.

Upon hearing these discouraging words, 2 of the 12 scouts stand up and dissent. Joshua and Caleb acknowledge that the land's inhabitants are fierce, but they urge the people to trust that God will ensure their successful conquest of it.

I can only guess at what it must have been like for Joshua and Caleb as they heard their 10 comrades deliver their disheartening report to the Israelite masses. Were they taken by surprise? Did they exchange glances of alarm as the majority of the spies proceeded to undermine the entire mission of the Exodus?

Unfortunately, the majority of the Israelites end up panicking over the 10 spies' report, and they begin to foment a popular revolt against Moses. Here's how the Torah describes things:

All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and the whole assembly said to them, "If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this wilderness! Why is the ETERNAL bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn't it be better for us to go back to Egypt?" And they said to each other, "We should choose a [new] leader and go back to Egypt." Then Moses and Aaron fell face-down in front of the whole Israelite assembly gathered there. Joshua son of Nun

and Caleb son of Yefunneh, who were among those who had explored the land, tore their clothes and said to the entire Israelite assembly, "The land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good. If the ETERNAL is pleased with us, God will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us. Only do not rebel against the ETERNAL. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will devour them. Their protection is gone, but the ETERNAL is with us. Do not be afraid of them." But the whole assembly talked about stoning [Joshua and Caleb], when the glory of the ETERNAL appeared at the tent of meeting before all the Israelites. (Numbers 14:2-10)

God responds to the Israelites' collective loss of trust by condemning this generation of them to wander in the wilderness for a period equal to one year for each day that the spies had spent investigating the Promised Land. God tells Moses, "...your children will be wanderers in the wilderness for forty years, and will bear your unfaithfulness, until your carcasses be consumed in the wilderness." (Numbers 14:33)

When I've taught this story to our 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> graders, I've referred to it as "The 12 Spies Disaster." It's right up there with that other biblical episode I refer to as "The Golden Calf Disaster," and it takes its place with other momentous bad choices that the Jewish people have made collectively during our long and complex history. These have included the "Shabbtai Tzvi Disaster," in which untold numbers of Jews in the 1600s followed a false messiah named Shabbtai Tzvi only to have their hopes of a messianic age deflated. There was also the "Suez War Disaster" in 1956, when leaders of Israel thought it would somehow work out well to team up with Britain and France to launch a surprise attack on Egypt's Suez canal in the hopes of securing shipping lanes, but the end result was international diplomatic chaos. And of course, who can forget the cultural Jewish disaster of the last decade that still haunts us all, the "Meet the Fockers" franchise of movies?

But seriously. When I think about what happened to the Jewish people during the 12 Spies Disaster, what I see is a small group of leaders taking an action that, in one fell swoop, undermined everything that Moses, Aaron, Miriam, and many others had struggled to build during the first year that the people had been out of Egypt. Remember, these scouts were leaders in their own right. They have clout in their own tribes and with the people as a whole. When Moses sends them off, he doesn't seem aware that the potential for this disaster is a possibility.

I find myself wondering what would have happened if Moses had gathered the scouts in private and had discussed in advance of their mission what their strategy would be for delivering their report if it turned out that they had worrisome or discouraging news to deliver. And why did Moses allow them to make their presentation directly to the entire community, without giving him a private presentation first? Upon returning from their mission, Moses knew that the scouts would be the only people among the Israelites who would have seen the actual land and its inhabitants. By letting the scouts have the opportunity to speak to the entire people without any agreed-upon strategy for handling challenging news, Moses gave them a tremendous amount of power to re-shape the community's agenda, and he allowed himself to appear out of control and caught off guard in front of everyone.

I realize that in our moment in history we're not thrilled with a leadership model that seeks to control the flow of information and that pre-packages how intelligence data is presented for public consumption, and I suppose that it sounds like I'm making the argument that this is exactly the kind of undemocratic pre-planning that Moses should have done. I guess what I'd say to that is that I think context matters a lot in this case. The Israelite slaves were not a functioning democracy with long-standing traditions of power-sharing between tribes and checks and balances on the power of different leaders. They were a rag-tag collective of people in transition, in an unsafe and unpredictable no-man's-land, and on an improbable mission to try to reach the Promised Land. Once they would settle there, *then* they could develop a more balanced leadership model.

But at this point in time Moses was focused on trying to teach the Israelites God's laws, and he was trying with all his strength to help them stay focused on their main goals, one of which was making it to the Land of Canaan alive and in a reasonably good relationship with God. It's true, the nature of his responsibility at this moment took the form of a kind of top-down leadership, but it would be unfair to characterize his leadership as dictatorial. Remember, the Torah tells us that Moses shared leadership responsibilities with Aaron, the High Priest; Miriam, the prophet; a system of judges of lower and higher courts; and 70 elders whom God had imbued with divine spirit to serve as leaders as well. So there *was* a structure for shared leadership even in the wilderness at that point.

And within the framework of that leadership structure, there was a need to think ahead about how an unstable population, like these recently freed slaves in the midst of a wrenching transition, would handle challenging information. The Torah doesn't tell us whether or not Moses thought this through before he sent the scouts on their reconnaissance mission into the Land of Canaan, or whether he and the other Israelite leaders had developed a plan for how to deliver the news. What we do see in the text is that Moses gave the scouts an open platform to address the people, and before Moses realized what was happening, in the course of one speech everything he and many others had labored so strenuously to do nearly slipped away.

In a way, this is a story about snatching defeat from the jaws of victory. After all, when the spies went off on their mission, the Hebrews had arrived, only a little more than a year after leaving Egypt, near the borders of the Promised Land. Think about that. Moses was about to be vindicated as having pulled off the most unexpected success story in ancient history. Despite the doubts and complaints of his people, he had shepherded them out of Egypt, across the Sea of Reeds, into the harsh desert, all the while telling them about the Promised Land they're heading towards, and now they've just about gotten there. A little reconnaissance mission, some data analysis, a few military strategy sessions to deal with any hostile locals, and it's done. This is where things stand for Moses when the community loses faith in him and in God, and when the trust and camaraderie amongst the people breaks apart into factional fighting and collective panic. The end result: No victory parades in the Judean hills. No beach parties on the coast. No entry into the land of milk and honey. Instead, God decrees 39 more years of wandering. How did Moses ever cope with such a setback?

In the final book of the Torah, Deuteronomy, we read about another time in Moses's life when he reaches the borders of the Promised Land only to be thwarted entry again. This time he's 40 years older, a man of 120, and a new generation has been born and grown into its strength in the

wilderness. They are ready to enter the Promised Land, and God has appointed a new leader, one of the 2 spies who dissented from the demoralizing report, Joshua, to guide the people into Canaan. Moses has been told that he will not be going with them. Instead, God directs him to ascend Mt. Nebo and survey the entire land.

Many Torah scholars have wondered what Moses must have been feeling as he beheld the Dead Sea, the lush green hills of the Galilee in the north, the curve of the Mediterranean Sea at the coast, and the Negev desert in the south. All kinds of things have been written speculating about the loss and disappointment he may have felt, as well as other feelings, perhaps a sense of amazement at the improbable story of his life. But I wonder if Moses was also feeling afraid on behalf of the Israelites. After all, the last time they had come this close to achieving their goal, the wheels had come off the bus and everything went chaotic. Could he sense that there was no chance of that happening again now? Was he simply relieved that, even without him, they were finally going to make it? Or was he still afraid that somehow crossing the Jordan River would elude this new nation?

We don't know. What we do know is that somehow he overcame what might have been his life's single most painful disappointment, the episode of the 12 spies. Perhaps his patience and perseverance can inspire each of us when we face our hardest disappointments. Perhaps we can learn to also appreciate the awesomeness of the adventure of our own lives even when we are confronted with disappointment over the things we'd hoped to accomplish that we didn't get to. Perhaps we can find a way to set aside our own egos enough to feel good on behalf of the others who may benefit from our life's best efforts, even if we don't get to enjoy those fruits ourselves. Shabbat shalom.