



BS"D

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## INTERNET PARSHA SHEET ON SHLACH - 5785

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**Rabbi Ahron Lopiansky**  
**The Very, Very Good Land**

It is no small coincidence that as we lein Parshas Shlach this week, Eretz Yisroel is enmeshed in such a difficult struggle. Between the terrible trepidation, and the incredible hope for an extraordinary victory, we need to better understand one of the central features of Eretz Yisroel.

Let us paraphrase a question posed in Sefer Akeidas Yitzchak: if Eretz Yisroel is such a wonderful country, and Yisroel should have grabbed it, then they are simply being stupid for rejecting it, rather than sinful. Even if they were scared of battle, and perhaps illogically doubted that Hashem could help them vanquish the K'na'anim, why is it considered that they "rejected Eretz Yisroel"?

Let us turn to an incredible point about Eretz Yisroel that the Netziv makes. He asks: when Kalev and Yehoshua described Eretz Yisroel as being a wonderful place they used the phrase "for the land is very, very good". Great people, and certainly the Torah, do not use empty flowery language! What is this repetition of "very" all about?

The Netziv answers that any gift which is continuously bestowed upon a person is lacking in two aspects: first, it tends to plateau, with the original excitement waning; and worse still, people become smug and cocky and suffer a sense of entitlement.

Eretz Yisroel, however, is very different. The immanence of Hashem's hashgacha means that there is a very high standard to uphold and corresponding consequences. This means that no sense of "entitlement" takes hold, and that the occasionally very difficult periods constantly highlight the good that happens. This is what's meant by "very, very good" - an extraordinary good, yet one devoid of the deficiencies typically associated with unusual abundance.

The Akeidas Yitzchak makes a similar point. He says that Israel did not reject the land because it was deficient per se; rather because it meant that our lives would be determined by a higher spiritual standard of behavior instead of the ebb and flow of nature. They were in effect rejecting a way of life of "walking with Hashem".

It is hard not to think of these incredible words at this time. If there is anything we crave, it is a non-eventful existence. From the day that we have repopulated Eretz Yisroel we have yearned for just a quiet tranquil uneventful existence. For many the code word for living in Eretz Yisroel was 'normalcy'. A normal natural uneventful life, after all that we have suffered. This has eluded us greatly. Both the incredible miracles and devastating tzoros are anything but 'normal' or 'natural'.

This is not in spite of Eretz Yisroel being the promised land but rather because of it. Sinking into the lethargy of natural existence and overflowing abundance would rob us of our essence: being a nation bound to Hashem and whose very fortune echoes that bond.

May the impact of the terrible travails that we've gone through during the past two years become the guardrail which will allow for pure tov to be bestowed upon us in the future without having any of the challenges associated with pure tov.

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<https://www.jewishpress.com/indepth/opinions/war-in-israel-faith-written-in-the-heavens/>

**War in Israel: Faith Written in the Heavens**  
**By Rabbi Moshe Taragin**

22 Sivan 5785 – June 18, 2025

We often think of faith in Hashem as something instinctive – either we have it or we don't. But emunah isn't just a feeling or an inborn trait. It's a choice. Faith is a decision.

We look at a challenge, reflect on what we've seen and experienced, and then we decide: to believe or not to believe. emunah isn't predicated upon complete clarity or certainty. It is merely a decision to trust, even when full understanding isn't possible.

In certain instances, the decision to have faith shapes our course of action. We rely upon emunah to carry us forward, to walk us across the bridge of fear and uncertainty. When we can't summon that faith, we become paralyzed and stuck, unable to move forward or reclaim our vision.

Such was the situation thousands of years ago in the desert, as we stood on the doorstep of Israel, poised to enter Eretz Yisrael and make history. The fairytale of leaving Egypt, of marching through the dry sea, and of eating heavenly "mann" was suddenly threatened by a harsh reality: Eretz Yisrael was inhabited by mighty nations and overshadowed by giants. We could not simply waltz into this land. The land of Hashem would not be easily claimed. Had we summoned emunah, we would have pressed forward and altered the course of history. Instead, we flinched, faltered in our faith, and rerouted our desert journey for 40 long years. Had we mustered faith, we would have been emboldened to choose a different course of action.

There is a second kind of emunah – not the kind that helps us choose between paths, but the kind we need when no other path exists. Sometimes, life doesn't offer us alternatives. Instead, we must draw on our faith and inner strength to face the only road before us.

At the Yam Suf, we were trapped, cornered between the advancing Egyptian army and the raging sea. Though some may have considered returning to Egypt, that was not a real option. We would have faced brutal persecution for our attempted rebellion. The Egyptians would have made an example of us to crush any future hope of escape among other slaves.

Our only chance – though it seemed beyond reason – was to plunge forward into the sea. Empowered by faith, we turned resolutely toward the water and watched as Hashem split the sea, offering us a path through the impossible. Sometimes faith helps us choose a direction. Other times, it strengthens us along the only path available.

**Cornered, We Chose Faith**

The past two years have demanded the second type of emunah, the kind we summon when there are no choices left. On Oct. 8th, we didn't weigh options or calculate risks. We were staring down an existential threat to our country, forced to confront a grim and painful reality.

Yet through deep faith and national resilience, we awakened inner strength to rise from that trauma. We stood back up and delivered stinging defeats to our enemies on multiple fronts.

Currently, we face a similar moment of faith. As the Iranian regime inched closer to a nuclear weapon – one they openly threatened to use against us – we were left with little choice but to act. As I write these words, our cities are under brutal nightly missile fire, resulting in heavy casualties and deep sorrow. But what choice did we have? The civilian casualties only underscore how catastrophic the situation might have been had Iran gone nuclear.

Once again, this week we are left with no alternatives but to summon faith and confront this daunting challenge with courage, and unshakable resolve.

**Faith Without a Battlefield**

Despite its similarities to Oct. 8th and the same kind of faith it demanded, this past week has felt different. The massacre of Oct. 7th was followed by a wave of mass mobilization. Our entire nation ran to the front – to defend, to rescue, and to battle terror. An entire country, and much of the Jewish world, rallied to provide support – material, emotional, and spiritual.

In those early days, our faith extended beyond the internal; it was made manifest through our actions, our unity, and our shared sense of purpose. We were engaged in a divine mission and a national calling. Our emunah took tangible shape in the world: it was experienced, witnessed, and lived fully. This week has posed a different kind of emunah-challenge. Most of the current war is being waged by the Air Force and intelligence units.

Tragically, rescue teams have spent the weekend pulling survivors and victims from the wreckage of missiles that targeted urban areas. Though many soldiers have been drafted, their current role – at least for now – is primarily precautionary, guarding against border infiltrations or violence in Palestinian towns.

For most of us, there is little to do but hold on to faith, running in and out of shelters at all hours of the day and night. In some ways, this makes our faith even more powerful. We are largely helpless to affect the outcome. We are left with only tefillah and faith. It feels like a Yam Suf moment – binary and absolute – with nothing to do but to pray that Hashem continues to shield our skies from the hands of evil.

**Oceans and Heavens**

At the Yam Suf, we looked downward – toward the raging waves crashing against the cliffs – praying that Hashem’s hand would guide us through the waters beneath our feet. Our faith was focused on the sea below. This week, our eyes have turned upward. We are glued to the heavens, listening to the roar of Air Force sorties and the sharp cracks of missile interceptions overhead. It all feels uncannily prophetic and déjà vu. Hashem struck Egypt from above during the plague of barad. He addressed us with a booming voice from the heavens at Sinai. He halted the sun for Yehoshua as we prevailed against our adversaries.

For Jews, moments of crisis often turn the heavens into the stage of divine intervention. Though we have endured painful losses and taken heavy blows, the tools Hashem has placed in our hands have shielded us from far greater devastation. As the battle moves from Azza’s sands to the skies above Tel Aviv, our faith rises – perhaps more fragile, but sharper – focused not on what we can do, but on what we must patiently await.

**Taken From Tanach**

This week also feels more Biblical. Our war with Hamas is being fought to defend our homeland and secure a safer, more peaceful future for our children. It is a war of necessity, grounded in territorial defense. Though Hamas represented a deeply immoral ideology – one that has, tragically, infiltrated and poisoned broader circles of society – it posed no immediate existential threat to the larger world.

Iran is ruled by madmen cloaked in the garb of religion. There is nothing sacred about men who murder their own citizens and feel no pang of conscience in targeting innocents. Though much of the world still refuses to admit this, we once again find ourselves saving them from their own moral blindness and inability to confront evil. If Iran obtains nuclear weapons, the

threat it poses will extend far beyond our borders – endangering all of humanity.

This week it feels as if we are reliving the mission of our grandfather Avraham, who was called Ivri – willing to stand on one side of the river alone, with clarity and conviction. Once again, we stand alone. We hope others will join us, but even if they don’t, we remain determined to rid the world of this menace.

<https://torah.org/torah-portion/frand-5785-shlach/>

**The Difference Between the Spies Sent by Moshe and the Spies Sent by Yehoshua**

**Parshas Shlach**

**Rav Yissocher Frand**

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand’s Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly portion: #1341 – A Beautiful Talis: Is That Called Hidur Mitzvah and Other Talis Issues. Good Shabbos!

Parshas Shelach contains the seminal event in Jewish history of the sending of spies and their subsequent negative report about Eretz Yisrael, and the resulting crying that night. Literally, Jewish history as we know it was set in motion because of this ill-fated mission. One of the famous questions that many commentaries focus on is that the Ribono shel Olam told Moshe Rabbeinu “Send out for yourself men who will spy out the Land of Canaan that I am giving to Bnei Yisrael” (Bamidbar 13:2). Apparently, the Ribono shel Olam not only acquiesced to this mission, He told Moshe to send out the meraglim (spies). Clearly, had the Ribono shel Olam wanted to stop the mission, He could have emphatically told Moshe not to send the meraglim. He didn’t do that.

So, what is the meaning of this? How could the Ribono shel Olam make sending the meraglim into amitzvah, and then it turns into such a tragedy? A famous and beautiful Medrash – the first first Medrash Rabbah in Parshas Shelach – cites the pasuk in Yehoshua whereby Yehoshua sent out meraglim: “And Yehoshua bin Nun dispatched two men – spies – from Shittim, secretly saying ‘Go, observe the land and Yericho.’” (Yehosha 2:1) History repeats itself. This is the Haftorah of Parshas Shelach. When Bnei Yisroel were on the threshold of entering Eretz Yisrael, Yehosha also sent out meraglim. He sent out two rather than twelve meraglim. They stayed in the house of Rachav Hazonah and they returned with their report about Yericho.

It is reasonable to assume that Yehoshua would have been very hesitant about sending out meraglim, based on what happened forty years earlier with the first group of meraglim. Nevertheless, Yehoshua proceeded with this mission. Not only that, but it turned out well. Not only did it turn out well, but the Medrash says about the two meraglim whom Yehoshua sent out, “There is no one dearer before the Almighty than a messenger sent out to perform amitzvah-mission who risks his life to successfully accomplish his mission.” The Medrash cites the two messengers that Yehoshua bin Nun sent as a prime quintessential example of shluhei mitzvah who risked their lives to successfully carry out their mitzvah-mission. The Medrash further records a Rabbinic tradition that those two meraglim were Pinchas and Kalev. The Medrash continues: The pasuk says that Yehoshua sent out two meraglim “cheresh” (‘secretly’) which the Medrash takes to mean that the two spies disguised themselves as pottery salesmen so no one would realize they were meraglim. They would shout “Anyone who needs an earthenware pot (a play on the word ‘cheres’ as the letters ‘shin’ and ‘sin’ can be interchanged), come purchase from us.”

The Gerer Rebbe, in his famous work Sefas Emes, writes that the Ribono shel Olam knew that the mission of the original meraglim sent by Moshe was fraught with danger. He saw the pitfalls and He realized what could happen. But the people wanted it and therefore He said, “I will give guidance so that they should be protected and not fall prey to the various temptations that they will face.” What was this guidance and protection provided by the Ribono shel Olam? He made it into amitzvah— Shelach lecha anashim!

The people wanted a spy mission. It could be done in one of two ways: They could do it on their own and the risk would be very high. But, instead, the Ribono shel Olam said “I will make it into amitzvah. When people do something l’shem mitzvah, then themitzvah protects them. Therefore, the potential danger associated with the sending of the meraglim would be mitigated.

The only problem was that in order to achieve that protection, themitzvah must be done l’shem mitzvah! You need to do it because the Ribono shel Olam said so. However, these meraglim had their own agenda. They were not doing it because the Ribono shel Olam so commanded. They were doing it for their own purposes. On a basic level, perhaps it was the strategic thing to do. They were not “mevatel their da’as to the Da’as of the Ribono shel Olam” (negate their opinions to the Almighty’s opinion). They did it because this was Military 101. You want to capture a city? You go scout it out and figure out the best place to attack.

Since they didn’t do it for the sake of themitzvah they did not receive the protection of that mitzvah. Thus, the Ribono shel Olam’s “plan” “did not work.” The Medrash contrasts this failed mission with the successful mission of Yehoshua’s meraglim – that was performed by faithful messengers who were acting l’shem mitzvah and with mesiras nefesh l’shem mitzvah. The result was a successful mission.

The Sefas Emes makes a further observation. The Medrash comments on the word cheresh as teaching that Yehoshua’s meraglim disguised themselves as pottery salesmen (selling klei cheres). One might ask why they were specifically selling pottery. Why not metal utensils? Why weren’t they shoe salesmen? The Sefas Emes answers beautifully that klei cheres are unique in that they have no intrinsic value. They are made out of pottery. They break. They don’t look good. They are porous. The whole purpose of an earthenware vessel is its mission. That is why the mefarshim say that klei cheres only become tameh from the inside. The outside of the earthenware vessel is valueless. Its whole purpose is to perform its function, which is to hold things.

This, according to the Medrash, is the symbolism of Pinchas and Kalev being pottery salesmen – they nullified themselves. There was no “me”. There was no personal agenda of why they were doing this. “We are doing this only because the Ribono shel Olam sent us. This is our mission.” Therefore, they were successful. There is nothing as dear to the Almighty as shluchei mitzvah who are moser nefesh strictly and only for the sake of Hashem. In such cases, the inherent dangers are ward off by the fulfillment of themitzvah and its associated zechus (merit).

The Sefas Emes concludes with a beautiful practical lesson: We are all shluchei mitzvah. We are sent down to this earth with a mission. The Ribono shel Olam takes this neshama – this holy soul, which is a chelek Elo-ka mi’ma’al (portion of the L-rd above) and puts it into a body and says ‘Here, go do your mission!’ We come down to this world, which is fraught with all sorts of danger and all sorts of temptations and pitfalls. It is very difficult for a person to maintain his kedusha and to maintain the status of being an erliche Yid (a Jew with integrity). Our challenge is to fulfill our mission, whatever that may be – whether butcher or baker or candlestick maker or lawyer or accountant or doctor or computer programmer or real estate broker or whatever – and to fulfill that mission completely l’shem shamayim. No matter what your mission may be, you will then have the protection of knowing that you are doing what the Ribono shel Olam wants you to do, and you are doing it solely for His sake.

Not everyone is cut out to sit and learn all the time, but everyone is put here with a mission. If part of your mission is that you need to earn a living and you need to support your family and give tzedaka, etc., etc. – and you are doing that because it is what you perceive as your mission from the Ribono shel Olam, then “There is no one dearer before the Almighty than those who are shluchei mitzvah – who faithfully, l’shem shamayim, carry out their mission.”

In this way, the most mundane and quotidian activity in this world can be turned l’shem shamayim. Once you do this, you will gain the protection that the meraglim of Yehoshua merited. On the other hand, when the mission

becomes “your mission” – whether it is to make money or to acquire power or whatever it may be – then the l’shem shamayim aspect will be lost, as was the case with the meraglim of Moshe, and the protection that the shlichus of themitzvah should afford will be lost as well.

That is unfortunately what happens so often to so much of mankind. They forget the mission and the l’shem mitzvah of that mission and therefore they need to deal with the vagaries and the pitfalls that are inevitable in almost every person’s life.

Glass Half Full/Glass Half Empty

One of the lessons of the meraglim is that there are only two kinds of people in this world: The person who sees the glass half full and the person who sees the glass half empty. The ten meraglim who came back with the negative report were unfortunately people who saw the glass half empty. They brought back an extraordinarily large cluster of grapes, which could be viewed in one of two ways: What a lush land this is! It is going to be easy to farm. It is going to be easy to make a living here. Look at this wonderful place! Or, “The people must be giants because why on earth would the fruit be so big?”

When the Ribono shel Olam made it happen that the locals were busy burying the dead so that they would be preoccupied and not notice the meraglim, that too could be viewed in one of two ways: Look at the favor the Ribono shel Olam did for us! Or, “Everyone drops dead over here. What kind of land is this?” This is the classic “glass half empty/glass half full” dichotomy.

I saw a famous story in thesefer Me’orei Ohr, describing an incident that occurred post-World War II, in one of the Displaced Persons camps. Rabbi Eliezer Silver, zt”l, who as part of the Vaad Hatzalah went around Europe in his U.S. Army uniform, came to Mauthausen, where there were Jewish Holocaust survivors. He wanted to make aminyan and had nine people. There was one Jewish survivor, who refused to join theminyan. Rabbi Silver tried to convince him to help make the prayer quorum. The fellow told Rabbi Silver “I will never again in my life daven or pick up a siddur.”

He explained his bitterness to the Rabbi: When he was in the concentration camp, there was a Jew who smuggled in a siddur, from which he would daven. He would then “rent” his siddur to the other prisoners of the concentration camp. The “rent” he charged to use his siddur was that those who wanted todaven had to give him their bread rations for the day. This bitter Jew told Rabbi Silver “When I saw a Jew that could stoop so low that he would make others forgo their meager rations in order to use his siddur, I decided that I don’t want to have anything to do with davening or with a siddur or with such a religion for the rest of my life.”

Rav Eliezer Silver said to this Jew: Why do you look at the Jew that rented out the siddur for a ration of bread? Why do you not, instead, look at the Jews who were willing to give up their rations of bread in order todaven? The bitter Jew conceded that Rav Silver was right. He decided to help complete the minyan.

Years later, this story was told over by the famous Nazi hunter, Simon Wiesenthal, at a conference of European rabbis, at which the rabbinical group presented Simon Wiesenthal with an award upon reaching his 91st birthday. When Wiesenthal finished the story, he delivered the punchline: “I was that bitter Jew whom Rabbi Silver convinced to join theminyan.”

This is one of the many lessons of the meraglim: The glass is either half full or half empty. In general, people who have the capacity to look at the glass as half full live happier lives. Other people don’t live as happy lives. This lesson is summed up by the pasuk: “...And you shall see the good of Yerushalayim all the days of your life.” (Tehillim 128:5)

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This week’s write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand’s Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly Torah portion. A complete catalogue can be ordered from the Yad Yechiel Institute, PO Box 511, Owings Mills MD 21117-0511. Call (410) 358-0416 or e-mail tapes@yadyechiel.org or visit <http://www.yadyechiel.org/> for further information.

<https://ots.org.il/parshat-shlach-iran-and-moral-clarity-in-times-of-war/>

This week's parsha is dedicated to the memory of Staff Sergeant Naveh Leshem z"l, a graduate of our Derech Avot High School in Efrat who fell in battle in southern Gaza. May his memory – and the memory of all our fallen soldiers – be a blessing.

### **Parshat Shlach, Iran and Moral Clarity in Times of War**

Ohr Torah Stone

#### **Rabbi Kenneth Brander**

As Israel engages in crucial defensive actions against Iran and bears the burden of safeguarding its citizens and future, the timeless lessons of this week's parsha feel especially relevant.

Parshat Shlach and its Haftarah in Sefer Yehoshua both recount missions of "spies" sent into the Land of Israel. But a closer reading reveals striking contrasts—in purpose, execution, and outcome—that offer enduring lessons on leadership, truth, and the moral demands of power – especially during times of war.

In Parshat Shlach, Moshe sends twelve men, kulam anashim roshei b'nei Yisrael heima—"all distinguished leaders of the Children of Israel"

Bamidbar 13:3). These were not undercover agents, but public figures, tasked not with espionage but with spiritual ambassadorship.

Their mission, as framed by Moshe, was not military, but inspirational: to affirm the land's bounty and excite the people for their divine inheritance. In fact, the Torah doesn't call them meraglim—spies—but rather tayarim, those who "explore" or "scout" (latur et ha'aretz). Their goal was to inspire, to elevate national faith, not to assess military risk.

Yet despite reporting the truth about what they saw—the land's fertility and the presence of formidable inhabitants—their mission failed. Why? Because they misunderstood their purpose. Though factually accurate, their words injected fear instead of faith, and in doing so, they sowed doubt in the hearts of the nation. Their truth lacked vision; their facts lacked trust in God's promise.

Contrast this with the Haftarah from Sefer Yehoshua. Here, Yehoshua sends two anonymous spies – much like the recently revealed clandestine missions Israel was compelled to undertake against Iran – explicitly to leragel—to gather intelligence (Yehoshua 2:1). This is classic espionage: secretive, strategic, and purposeful. They are not known. Their goal is to prepare for battle, not to inspire the people.

And yet, Yehoshua's spies' clandestine mission produces an extraordinary moral moment. In the heart of enemy territory, they encounter Rachav, a Canaanite woman of ill repute, who not only protects them but declares her faith in the God of Israel. She is spared—and later, according to the Rabbis (Bavli Megillah 14b), becomes a righteous convert, counted among the ancestors of prophets.

Why does the Tanach preserve this story of Rachav for us? Because it teaches us that even in war – especially in war – the Jewish people are held to a higher moral standard. The Rambam (Hilchot Melachim 6:1) famously rules that even when waging a milchemet mitzva, an obligatory war, the Jewish people must first seek peace. War, even when justified, must be guided by ethical clarity. The saving of Rachav is not a tactical footnote; it is a moral headline.

This message could not be more relevant today. For years, Israel has warned the world that Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons threatens not only Israel, but the entire free world. The Torah demands that we uphold justice and compassion, but when we are left with no choice, we bear responsibility to protect our people and the values of a free society. Unlike Iran, whose attacks deliberately target our civilians, Israel focuses solely on military objectives—even at great risk to our pilots and soldiers. Like Yehoshua's spies, who recognized and honored Rachav's humanity, we too must continue, despite the extreme difficulty, to uphold our moral compass, even when our enemies exploit that very morality. This is not a weakness; it is our greatest strength! It is the embodiment of Tzelem Elokim, the divine image in every person.

May we be blessed with leaders – military, political and spiritual – who possess both the strategic clarity of Yehoshua's spies and the humility and moral vision that Moshe's emissaries lacked. And may we always remember

that the land we strive to protect is not merely territory—but a living testimony to the principles and values we uphold.

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from: **Ira Zlotowitz** <Iraz@klalgovoah.org>

date: Jun 19, 2025, 7:01 PM

subject: **Klal Gavoah in memory of Rav Meir Zlotowitz zt"l**

Tidbits • Parashas Shelach 5785

This week is Shabbos Mevorchim Chodesh Tamuz. Rosh Chodesh is next Thursday & Friday, June 26th and 27th. The molad is Wednesday evening at 9:58 PM and 4 chalakim.

The first opportunity for Kiddush Levana is on Motzaei Shabbos, June 28th.

The final opportunity is on Wednesday night, July 9th.

Parsha in a Paragraph

Shelach: The Meraglim scout out the Land and return with a negative report

• Klal Yisrael accepts their report and cries; Hashem says He will eradicate the nation • Moshe davens; Vayomer Hashem Salachti Kidvarecha • Kalev's reward • The decree of forty years of wandering • The Ma'pilim try to enter Eretz Canaan and are defeated • Wine Nesachim (libations) are to be brought along with offerings • Mitzvah of Hafrashas Challah • The offerings for an individual or an entire community who commit idolatry • The Mekosheish Eitzim • The mitzvos of Tzitzis and Techeiles (that reminds us of all of Hashem's mitzvos)

Haftarah: The haftarah (Yehoshua 2:1-24) speaks of the Meraglim whom Yehoshua sent to scout out Eretz Yisrael before capturing it. While the Meraglim in Parashas Shelach were lacking faith in Hashem to some degree, the Meraglim sent by Yehoshua went with full faith in Hashem and sought only to assess the best way to launch Bnei Yisrael's conquest.

Parashas Shelach • 119 Pesukim • 2 Obligations • 1 Prohibition

1) Separate challah from dough and give it to the kohen. 2) Place tzitzis on a four cornered garment. 3) Do not allow thoughts that are antithetical to the Torah to affect you; do not pursue materialism.

Mitzvah Highlight: The Sefer HaChinuch explains that Hafrashas Challah transforms bread from a physical entity alone to a vehicle through which Bnei Yisrael perform a mitzvah. The ubiquitous nature of bread as a source of sustenance allows for maximum performance of the mitzvah and constant opportunities to earn merit

בְּמִסְפַּר הַיָּמִים אֲשֶׁר-תֵּרְתֶּם אֶת-הָאָרֶץ אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם לִשְׁנָה יוֹם לִשְׁנָה תִּשְׁאוּ אֶת-עֲוֹנוֹתֵיכֶם אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה

Like the number of the days that you spied out the land, forty days, a day for a year, a day for a year, you shall bear your iniquities forty years (Bamidbar 14:34)

Bnei Yisrael were punished with wandering in the desert for forty years, corresponding to the forty days that the Meraglim traversed the land and returned with a bad report on Eretz Yisrael. Although the lashon hara spoken against Eretz Yisrael was certainly wrong, it was spoken only upon their return. Why, then, was the punishment correspondent to the days they spent within Eretz Yisrael?

Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz zt"l answers that we learn from here that not only is lashon hara forbidden in speech, it is even forbidden to think and contemplate negative thoughts about a fellow Jew. Rashi (13:26) reveals to us that, in fact, the negative intentions of the Meraglim were present from the time they entered the land. Therefore, the sin of lashon hara in the form of negative thoughts was present for all forty days. Rav Elya Baruch Finkel zt"l expounds further with the words of the Chofetz Chaim who writes that the underlying sin of lashon hara is the ayin ra - an eye with which one views his fellow negatively. This negative outlook is what causes one to develop negative views regarding a fellow Jew. The noted mechaneches, Rebbetzin Bruria David a"h, would tell her students that our hashkafos and feelings are also "lemaysa" and practical in nature, as they guide our actions and practice. One must be careful about thoughts in one's mind and heart in order to cultivate positive words and deeds.

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<https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/1138602>

**Learning From The Spies and Miriam: Which Sin Was Worse?**

## Rabbi Daniel Z. Feldman

The story of the Spies, and their negative portrayal of the Land of Israel in this week's Torah reading immediately follows the story that closes last week's reading, Miriam speaking lashon hara against her brother Moses and her subsequent punishment is immediately followed by the episode of the spies who spoke negatively of the land of Israel. The Rabbis (Yalkut Shimoni, Isaiah, remez 459, quoted by Rashi in his commentary to the Torah) comment on the juxtaposition by noting that in their behavior, the spies failed to learn the lesson of Miriam.

The comment is difficult, because it seems to imply there was a message a fortiori; what Miriam did was bad, what the spies did was worse. However, instinct would point in the other direction; Miriam spoke about a human being, with feelings and emotions, while the spies sinned against land. In fact, the Talmud itself adopts this perspective, stating that the story of the spies instructs on the severity of lashon hara, as their punishment was for disparaging the land, and surely to speak badly of humans must therefore be far worse. (Arakhin 15a. See also R. Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin, Heamek Davar, Deut. 24:9; Shemirat HaLashon, Parashat Shlach; R. Moshe Galanti, Zevach Shelamim, Parashat Beha'alotekha, #94; R. Raphael Tzaban, Nefesh Chayah, II, Shlach, 1; R. Avigdor Nevenzhai, Sichot LeSefer Bamidbar, #8 and #9; and R. Baruch Mordechai Ezrachi, in BeYad HaLashon, pp. 315-316.) It would seem, rather, that the Rabbis are making a different point. Miriam's transgression was indeed, in terms of the victim, worse than that of the spies. The lesson the spies should have learned was not that their disparagement of the land constituted an even more severe violation. The lesson actually had to do with the extreme complexity and challenges involved in addressing negativity through speech and thought. If Miriam, with her personal greatness and noble intentions, could still run afoul of this value, clearly a program of mental reorientation and proactive attitude adjustment is necessary. An instructive comparison may come from the laws of kiddushon Friday night. When this ritual is performed over wine, the practice is to cover the challah breads. The Talmud and commentators offer a number of possible explanations (Talmud Yerushalmi, cited in Tur, O.C. 271, and see Ohr Zarua, Hil. Shabbat II, 22), one of which seems particularly striking. According to the general rule, the blessing is recited on bread first; in this case, the kiddush is being recited on the wine, which is thus the subject of the first blessing. Accordingly, the challah breads are covered so they not "witness" their losing this honor to the wine and thus be "embarrassed".

This attribution of human feelings to pastry is difficult to understand. Are we truly concerned that inanimate objects will experience humiliation? Especially considering what the challah will go through a few minutes later is far worse. It seems, rather, that the concern is to the complexity of human emotion. Determining what will or will not have hurtful consequences to another is a highly involved enterprise, one that does not come easily to the untrained intuition. To assume that undeveloped instinct will rise to the challenge of the moment is dangerous; offense can occur even unintentionally, when the speaker is unpracticed in the nuances of human sensitivity. Thus, even interactions with inanimate objects are viewed as opportunities to hone the awareness necessary to deal with actual people. Being cognizant of a "slight" to challah will, it is hoped, ensure awareness of the risk involved when a human is in such a situation. The value of this exercise could thus explain the extensive analyses and hypothetical discussions devoted to the practice of challah covering (see, for example, Resp Iggerot Moshe; R. David Rosenberg, Responsa Minchat David, I, 2; R. Yisrael David Harfenes, Nishmat Shabbat, II, p. 41). The obligation to remember Miriam, according to Nachmanides possibly a Torah commandment, is to train oneself in sensitivity in advance, so that when a situation presents itself, there is a hope that the challenge will be negotiated successfully.

This, then, is the lesson that the spies failed to learn. Immediately after Miriam's punishment, to go and indulge a biased negativity in evaluating the land of Israel was a complete rejection of the moral message.

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<https://outorah.org/p/227965>

## Shelach 5785 – Our God and Our People

### Rabbi Moshe Hauer

During these very difficult days, not only do others challenge our sacred and inherent connection to the holy land of Eretz Yisrael, but they also threaten our very existence. In response, we must rise to the challenge by embracing both our mission defined by God to serve as His goy kadosh, His holy nation, and our firm commitment to support and protect each other and tie our own identity and fate to our people.

That duality is not unique to these times as in Judaism there is no gap between shul and state. As Rav Yitzchak Hutner noted, the words Shema Yisrael, "Hear O Israel", are not just an introduction but an essential part of the Jew's declaration of faith: our connection to God and our national identity are inextricably intertwined (Pachad Yitzchak, Chanukah, 13:3). This is a truism that has been repeated in different forms and every generation, from Ruth's statement to Naomi, "Your nation is my nation, and your God is my God," to the once-assimilated Herzl's declaration that "Zionism is the return to Judaism even before the return to the land of Israel."

Redemption in the story of the spies likewise came from two angles.

Yehoshua and Calev both resisted their peers and refused to join them in turning the hearts of their people away from the Land of Israel, yet their resistance had two very different sources. Yehoshua drew his strength from a prayer uttered on his behalf and made a part of his identity by his teacher Moshe, who pleaded that "God should save you from the plot of the spies", whereas Calev made a detour to visit Chevron, where he prayed at the graves of the patriarchs that he not be swayed by his fellow spies (Rashi to Bamidbar 13:16 and 13:22).

Yehoshua was the ultimate disciple of Moshe. Both were more associated with God than with Israel. Moshe – the Ish HaElokim (Man of God) – was raised outside of his family in the house of Pharaoh, and then – after growing up and leaving that house – was removed from his nation as well, to live and raise his family in the land of Midian. Moshe was distanced by God from both his roots and his branches, as his children did not succeed him nor even follow in his ways in any notable manner. He was a man of God more than a man of the people. Yehoshua, his student, joined Moshe in his Divine isolation, waiting for Moshe at the foot of the mountain (Shemot 24:13, 32:17) and never leaving Moshe's tent (Shemot 33:11). And, like Moshe, Yehoshua did not have children who succeeded him (Megillah 14b).

What protected Yehoshua, the man of God, from joining with the spies? God's repeated wish and command that the Jewish people enter the land of Israel. God saved him from the plot of the spies.

Calev, on the other hand, was a man of the people. Calev would marry Miriam, who questioned how Moshe could leave his family for the sake of pursuing the word of God (Bamidbar 12:1). Calev and Miriam would together create the offspring that would ultimately result in the Davidic dynasty (TB Sotah 11b), producing the king charged with the national destiny of the Jewish people, whose heart is the heart of the Jewish community (Rambam Hilchot Melachim 3:6).

What protected Calev, the man of the people, from joining the spies? His familial and national identity. Calev visited his forefathers buried in Chevron where he was reminded of his roots and destiny in Eretz Yisrael. That visit and vision precluded him from joining with the spies in rejecting the land that represents both the past and the future of his people.

Redemption comes from these two kinds of heroes and sources of strength that inevitably merge: our commitment to the word of God and our bond with our nation, our identity, and our destiny. During these especially challenging times, we redouble our commitment to the Jewish people and to our mission as Hashem's holy nation. Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echad.

Rabbi Moshe Hauer joined the Orthodox Union (OU) as its Executive Vice President on May 1, 2020. In this role he serves as the organization's rabbinic leader, heading its communal-oriented efforts and serving as its professional religious/policy leader and primary spokesman.

<https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/1138596>

**Shelach 5785: Calev's Faith & Op. Rising Lion**  
**Mrs. Michal Horowitz**

June 17 2025

In Parshas Shelach, the Torah relates to us the Cheit Ha'Meraglim, the infamous Sin of the Spies, who were sent to scout out the land of Israel, ahead of the nation's planned entry into the Land.

Choosing twelve select men - one man from each tribe - Moshe sent the scouts to Canaan, along with instructions as to what they should look for. Is the land fertile or lean? Are the cities fortified or open? Are the people strong or weak, populous or few? Are there trees, and what about its fruit?

The spies ascend to the land and scout it out for forty days. Upon returning, the spies speak their infamous lashon harah. "We cannot ascend!" they cry.

"Our enemies are on every border, including our arch-enemy, Amalek, who dwells in the south. The cities are very fortified, the people are very strong, we saw giants in the land, everyone was burying their dead, and the fruits are enormous. It would be better to return to Egypt than to enter this land!"

And with these words, ten spies turn the hearts of the entire nation - 600,000 men - against the land, and against G-d, keviyachol.

Perhaps one of the most fateful pasukim in the entire Torah is found within this narrative: וַתִּשָּׂא, כָּל-הָעֵדָה, נִיתְּנוּ, אֶת-קוֹלָם; וַיִּבְכּוּ הָעָם, בְּלִילָה הַהִוא

And the entire assembly lifted up, and they gave forth their voice, and the nation cried on that night (14:1). Chazal (Taanis 29a) teach us that the night they cried was Tisha b'Av, and Hashem declared: "You cried a purposeless cry, I will establish for you a crying for generations."

"You rejected My Land?" HKB"H declared. "As a punishment from turning away from my good Land, In the future, R"L, due to your sins (Yoma 9b), She will reject you in turn."

And on this day of tragedy, the bitter day of 9 Av, many calamitous events have befallen our nation (Mishnah Taanis 4:6), including the destruction of both Batei Mikdash.

Only two of the scouts - Calev ben Yefuneh from the tribe of Yehuda, and Hoshea (Yehoshua) bin Nun, from the tribe of Ephraim - see the good, and speak the good.

In response to the initial negative reports given by the other spies, the pasuk says: וַיִּהְיוּ כָלֵב וְהוֹשֵׁעַ בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֹּאמְרוּ, עֲלֵה נָעִלָה וְנִרְשְׁנוּ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ--כִּי-יָכוֹל נוֹכַח, לָהּ

And Calev silenced the nation against Moshe, and he said: We can surely ascend and take possession of the land, for we are surely able to do so! (Bamidbar 13:30).

And after the complete slanderous report of the spies, both Calev and Yehoshua tear their garments and declare to the entire assembly of the Children of Israel: הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר עָבְרָנוּ בָּהּ לְתוֹר אֶתָּה טוֹבָה הָאָרֶץ מֵאֲדָם  
The land which we passed through, to scout it out, is a very, very good land, If Hashem desires us, He will bring us to this land and give it to us, (it is) a land that is flowing with milk and honey. But against Hashem do not rebel, and do not fear the nations of the land, for we shall consume them, their protection has left them, and Hashem is with us, do not fear! (14:6-9).

As a reward for their faithfulness, of that entire generation of men, only Calev and Yehoshua merited to enter the land.

In a drasha delivered on Shabbos day, June 22, 1940, in the Warsaw Ghetto, the Aish Kodesh, Rav Kalonymus Kalman Shapira zt'l HY"D, related the following words to the oppressed and downtrodden Jews, R"L:

Quoting the pasuk: And Calev silenced the people toward Moshe, and said: We can go up and take possession of it, for we are able to overcome! (13:30), the Aish Kodesh said, "Let us understand: The Spies advanced quite reasonable arguments [in their opposition to the conquest of the Promised Land] - "The people that dwell in the land are fierce and the cities are very fortified" (13:28) - so why did Calev not debate with them, refuting their arguments and rationales, instead of merely stating, "We should go up at once?"

"Such, however, must be the faith of the Jew: he must take courage and believe that G-d will save him, not only at a time when he sees a logical and natural way open for his salvation. Rather, even at such times when, G-d

forbid, he sees no logical and natural way open for his salvation, he should have faith that G-d will save him, taking courage in his faith and trust. On the contrary, at such a time, it is better not to insist on finding some rationale, some approach to a natural [way out of the predicament], for since he will not find any straightforward resolution, his faith may, G-d forbid, be weakened thereby, and a flaw in his faith may possibly delay his salvation. Rather one must say, "It is all true: The people that dwell in the land are fierce. It is correct that: The cities are well fortified." Nevertheless, I believe that G-d - Who transcends all boundaries and limitations - will save us. עֲלֵה נָעִלָה וְנִרְשְׁנוּ אֶתָּה! "We should go up and possess it - without any rationale and without reason. Such a faith and trust in G-d hastens our salvation" (The Holy Fire, Nehemia Polen, [A Jason Aronson Book, 1999], pp.71-72). Baruch Hashem our situation today, as a nation, is worlds apart from the Jews of 1940 in the Warsaw Ghetto R"L. However, these words of the holy Aish Kodesh are as true, as powerful, as important, and as chizuk-filled, today as they were then.

For decades, our nation, and our Medina, have feared the powerful, evil, satanic regime of Iran, along with its proxy nations, including the terrorist groups Hamas, and Hezbollah, and more recently, the Houthis of Yemen - may all their names be blotted out l'netzach nitzachim.

And yet, yeshuas Hashem k'heref ayin, the salvation of Hashem comes in the blink of an eye. After the decimation of Hezbollah months ago, we are witnessing - before our very eyes - miracles of Biblical proportions with the ongoing destruction of the Iranian regime. Within less than a week's time, since the Israeli attacks on Iran began last Friday around 3:30am (Israel time), Iran has been decimated.

Our years of worry and fear have been proven to be, thus far, for naught B"H. When Hashem - The Ish Milchamah, Hashem Shemo! (Shemos 15:3) - desires that our enemies be struck down, we do not need to worry about rationale or reason. We do not need to find a natural approach to overtake the enemies who wish to destroy us. We do not need a straightforward resolution to our troubles. הָרָעָם כְּלִבָּיָא יָקוּם וְכֹאֲרֵי יִתְנַשֵּׂא לֹא יִשְׁכַּב עַד-יִשְׁכַּח לְפָנָיו וְדָם-חֲלָלִים יִשְׁתָּה Behold, a people that rises like a lioness and raises itself like a lion. It does not lie down until it eats its prey and drinks the blood of the slain (Bamidbar 23:24).

Like Calev, we must only trust in Hashem, knowing that "we can surely ascend, we will conquer the enemy, כִּי-יָכוֹל נוֹכַח, לָהּ, for with Hashem on our side, we will surely succeed!" פִּי ה' אֶלְקֵינוּ הַהֵלֶךְ עִמָּכֶם לְהִלָּחֵם לָכֶם עִם-אֹיְבֵיכֶם  
For Hashem your G-d goes out with you, to fight for you with your enemies, to save you (Devarim 20:4).

בברכת בשורות טובות ושבת שלום

from: **Alan Fisher** <afisherads@yahoo.com> date: Jun 19, 2025, 8:43 PM  
subject: Potomac Torah Study Center Devrei Torah for Shabbat Shelach Lecha 5785

Shlach Lecha 5785; Mevarchim HaHodesh

Rosh Hodesh Tammuz is next Thursday and Friday

Devrei Torah are now Available for Download (normally by noon on

Fridays) at [www.PotomacTorah.org](http://www.PotomacTorah.org). Thanks to Bill Landau for hosting the Devrei Torah archives.

May Hashem protect Israel and Jews everywhere during 5785. May Hashem's protection shine on all of Israel, the IDF, and Jews throughout the world. May the remaining hostages soon come home, hostilities cease, and a new era bring security and rebuilding for both Israel and all others who genuinely seek peace. Iran is now sending sophisticated cluster bomb missiles into Israel to maximize damage and casualties. May Hashem protect Israel and all our people from our enemies and their weapons.

Writing an introduction to my Devrei Torah each week, especially coming up with something I have not already discussed in recent years, is challenging enough. This week, with thunderstorms knocking out Internet connections several times during the past two days, has presented more issues than usual.

In addition to the regular Torah cycle, Sivan this year includes our continuing struggle with Gaza, the war with Iran. The Iranian monsters are

now sending missiles with vicious cluster bombs into Israel, killing and injuring dozens of our Israeli fellow Jews, and destroying important buildings (including parts of the Weitzman Institute and hospitals). While taking a break from my preparation last night, I picked up a book that I had acquired recently, **Rabbi Ephraim Oshry's Responsa from the Holocaust**. Rabbi Oshry was a young man when he was caught up in the ghetto of Kovno, Lithuania after the Nazis invaded the country in 1941. The Jews of Kovno came to Rabbi Oshry frequently with Halachic questions that arose when the Jews were confined to the ghetto and concentration camp and did not have access to Kosher food, ritual items, and other support that we take for granted. As the only halachic authority in the ghetto and concentration camp, Rabbi Oshry had to respond to questions according to Halachic precedent in situations that the rishonim probably never anticipated. Thanks to the mercy of Hashem, Rabbi Oshry was one of the few European Rabbis to survive the Nazi horrors. During the war, he wrote his questions and responses on scraps of paper. After the war, he transcribed the material and published the questions and responsa in Hebrew. He later translated, condensed, and published selected items in English in Responsa from the Holocaust.

In our parsha, Moshe selects and sends twelve men, leaders of the tribes (other than Levi) to enter the land of Canaan, check whether the land is fertile, the people are strong or weak, and the cities are open or walled. Ten of the men verify that the land is fertile but say that the people are giants and that B'Nai Yisrael would not be able to conquer the land. Only two of the men (Yehoshua and Caleb) give a contrary report, that with Hashem's help, the Jews would be able to conquer the land. Moshe and God are furious. The people ignore the lessons of God's power in defeating Paro and the Egyptian army, destroying the most powerful country of the time (Egypt), bringing water and food for three million people in a desert for forty years – something that God has provided because of His love for B'Nai Yisrael and our Avot. Hashem decrees that the generation of the Exodus will all die out, except for Yehoshua and Caleb, over the next forty years and that only the next generation, those not yet twenty years old, will survive to enter and take over the land that He had promised to our ancestors.

God concludes the parsha by telling Moshe to command to the people that they make tzitzit for the corners of their garments, and include a thread of turquoise blue wool among the fringe strings. When we see the thread, we are to remember Hashem's mitzvot, perform them, and not stray from His mitzvot by following any other influences. The mitzvah of tzitzit is the third paragraph of the Shema, words that we recite in our services twice a day to continue to refresh our memory of Hashem's commandment. Our tradition is that the mitzvah of tzitzit is equal to all the other mitzvot of the Torah, because when we look at them, we are to recall all of Hashem's mitzvot. In the Kovno ghetto, the residents had no way to obtain ready made tzitzit or fibers to make new ones. One man, Meir Abelow, worked in a workshop where Jewish slave laborers used wool. Abelow planned to steal some strands of wool, hide them, and bring them into the ghetto where Jews could spin them for tzitzit. He asked Rabbi Oshry whether the Jews could use the stolen wool to make tzitzit and whether he (Abelow) would be sinning by stealing wool for this purpose. Rabbi Oshry ruled that taking wool from the Germans did not constitute theft and that the yeshiva boys could use the wool to make tzitzit. He also ruled that since there was no other way to obtain four corner garments, they could cut a large tallit in two, to turn it into two small garments. This plan brought great joy to the yeshiva boys, because they now had an opportunity to fulfill the great mitzva of tzitzit.

When we look around at the world, we should focus on God's love of our people and continued protection despite the hatred of our enemies throughout the world. Yes, our enemies seek to kill us and destroy our land and families. However, no other nation or people has survived for 3500 years. It is a miracle that such a small nation has survived for so long. Other, much larger and more powerful nations and religions have disappeared into other nations and religions. Meanwhile, we Jews, despite the efforts of many generations of enemies, continue to thrive and carry on our relationship with our Creator. Shabbat Shalom,

Hannah and Alan

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from: **Rabbi Chanan Morrison** <chanan@ravkooktorah.org>

date: Jun 19, 2025, 2:49 AM

subject: **Rav Kook on Shlach: The Sin of Tzelofchad**

Shlach: **The Sin of Tzelofchad**

“Our father died in the desert... He died because of his own sin, and he had no sons.” (Num. 27:3)

So begins the request of the daughters of Tzelofchad. Since there were no sons in the family, the daughters wanted to know: may we inherit his portion in the Land of Israel? Their question stumped Moses, and was referred to God Himself.

The Torah doesn't tell us, but we are curious nonetheless: what was the sin for which Tzelofchad deserved to die? The text seems to imply that his transgression was an unusual one: “He died because of his own sin.”

In the reading of Shelach it says:

“The Israelites were in the desert, and they found a man collecting wood on the Sabbath.” (Num. 15:32)

Interesting. Again, we find the phrase, “in the desert.” (And quite superfluous, considering that the entire book takes place in the desert.) Once again, Moses is stumped, and needs to ask God what is the appropriate punishment. Who was this unidentified man, the wood-gatherer who desecrated the Sabbath?

It was Rabbi Akiva who made the connection between the man with the unknown sin, and the sin of the unknown man. Tzelofchad was the Sabbath wood-gatherer. That was his personal transgression, for which he was punished (Shabbat 96b).

Is there a connection between Tzelofchad's desecration of the Sabbath, and the fact that he died without sons, thus jeopardizing his inheritance in the Land of Israel? Also, why does the Torah emphasize that his sin took place “in the desert”?

Trapped in the Desert

The desert represents transience. A desert is not a place that can be settled and cultivated. We only pass through the desert as we make our way to a permanent location, to our true destination. Life in the desert is transient; it is only a preparation and a means towards a desired objective.

Even the holiness in the desert was temporary. Mount Sinai was sanctified solely for the sake of the Torah's revelation; afterwards, the mountain reverted to its previous state. Permanent holiness only exists in the Land of Israel and the city of Jerusalem.

Sanctity within the dimension of time — as in space — may also have varying degrees of permanence. The most eternal holiness in time is the holiness of the Sabbath. “The Israelites will observe the Sabbath, making it a day of rest for all generations, an eternal covenant” (Ex. 31:16).

Unlike the Sabbath, which falls out every seventh day, the holidays are dependent upon the calendar, as set by the high court. The sanctity of the holidays is thus of a less eternal nature. Additionally, the holidays relate to historical events: the Exodus from Egypt, the journey in the desert, the Revelation of the Torah. The Sabbath, on the other hand, transcends the realm of mankind. It celebrates the very essence of creation.

Tzelofchad's sin took place in the desert, and he died in the desert. When Tzelofchad desecrated the eternal sanctity of the Sabbath, he transformed the desert from a passageway into a dead-end. He became disconnected from eternal holiness, both in time and space. He lacked permanence and continuity in the dimension of time — the Sabbath day — and in the dimension of space — his inheritance in the Land of Israel.

We should learn from Tzelofchad's mistake, and avoid being locked within the temporal realm of the desert. We need to stay focused on that which is enduring and eternal, and not confuse the way-station for the final destination.

(Gold from the Land of Israel, pp. 243-245. Adapted from Ein Eyah vol. IV, p.238)

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from: The Rabbi Sacks Legacy <info@rabbisacks.org>



The episode of the spies has rightly puzzled commentators throughout the centuries. How could they have got it so wrong? The land, they said, was as Moses had promised. It was indeed “flowing with milk and honey.” But conquering it was impossible. “The people who live there are powerful, and the cities fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of the giant there... We can’t attack those people; they are stronger than we are... All the people we saw there are of great size. We saw the titans there... We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and so we seemed in theirs” (Num. 13:28-33).

They were terrified of the inhabitants of the land, and entirely failed to realise that the inhabitants were terrified of them. Rahab, the prostitute in Jericho, tells the spies sent by Joshua a generation later: “I know that the Lord has given you this land and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you ... our hearts melted in fear and everyone’s courage failed because of you, for the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below” (Joshua 2:10-11).

The truth was the exact opposite of the spies’ report. The inhabitants feared the Israelites more than the Israelites feared the inhabitants. We hear this at the start of the story of Bilaam:

“Now Balak son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites, and Moab was terrified because there were so many people. Indeed, Moab was filled with dread because of the Israelites.” Num. 22:2-3

Earlier the Israelites themselves had sung at the Red Sea:

“The people of Canaan will melt away; terror and dread will fall on them.” Ex. 15:15-16

How then did the spies err so egregiously? Did they misinterpret what they saw? Did they lack faith in God? Did they – more likely – lack faith in themselves? Or was it simply, as Maimonides argues in *The Guide for the Perplexed*, that their fear was inevitable given their past history? They had spent most of their lives as slaves. Only recently had they acquired their freedom. They were not yet ready to fight a prolonged series of battles and establish themselves as a free people in their own land. That would take a new generation, born in freedom. Humans change, but not that quickly (See *Guide for the Perplexed* III, 32).

Most of the commentators assume that the spies were guilty of a failure of nerve, or faith, or both. It is hard to read the text otherwise. However, in the Hassidic literature – from the Baal Shem Tov to R. Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger (Sefat Emet) to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson – an entirely different line of interpretation emerged, reading the text against the grain to dramatic effect so that it remains relevant and powerful today. According to their interpretation, the spies were well-intentioned. They were, after all, “princes, chieftains, leaders” (Num. 13:2-3). They did not doubt that Israel could win its battles with the inhabitants of the land. They did not fear failure; they feared success. Their concern was not physical but spiritual. They did not want to leave the wilderness. They did not want to become just another nation among the nations of the earth. They did not want to lose their unique relationship with God in the reverberating silence of the desert, far removed from civilisation and its discontents.

Here they were close to God, closer than any generation before or since. He was a palpable presence in the Sanctuary in their midst, and in the Clouds of Glory that surrounded them. Here His people ate manna from heaven and water from the rock and experienced miracles daily. So long as they stayed in the desert under God’s sheltering canopy, they did not need to plough the earth, plant seeds, gather harvests, defend a country, run an economy, maintain a welfare system, or shoulder any of the other earthly burdens and distractions that take peoples’ minds away from the Divine.

Here, in no-man’s-land, in liminal space, suspended between past and future, they were able to live with a simplicity and directness of encounter they

could not hope to find once they had re-entered the gravitational pull of everyday life in the material world. Paradoxically, since a desert is normally the exact opposite of a garden, the wilderness was the Israelites’ Eden. Here they were as close to God as were the first humans before their loss of innocence.

If that comparison is too discordant, recall that Hosea and Jeremiah both compared the wilderness to a honeymoon. Hosea said in the name of God: “I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her” (Hos. 2:16), implying that in the future God would take the people back there to celebrate a second honeymoon. Jeremiah said in God’s name, “I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the wilderness, through a land not sown” (Jer. 2:2). For both prophets, the wilderness years were the time of the first love between God and the Israelites. That is what the spies did not want to leave. Clearly this interpretation is not the plain sense of the narrative, but we should not dismiss it on that account. It is, as it were, a psychoanalytical reading, an account of the unconscious mindset of the spies. They did not want to let go of the intimacy and innocence of childhood and enter the adult world. Sometimes it is hard for parents to let go of their children; at others it is the other way round. But there must be a measure of separation if children are to become responsible adults. Ultimately the spies feared freedom and its responsibilities.

But that is what Torah is about. Judaism is not a religion of monastic retreat from the world. It is supremely a religion of engagement with the world. The Torah is a template for the construction of a society with all its gritty details: laws of warfare and welfare, harvests and livestock, loans and employer-employee relationships, the code of a nation in its land, part of the real world of politics and economics, yet somehow pointing to a better world where justice and compassion, love of the neighbour and stranger, are not remote ideals but part of the texture of everyday life. God chose Israel to make His presence visible in the world, and that means that Israel must live in the world.

To be sure, the Jewish people were not without their desert-dwellers and ascetics. The Qumran sect known to us from the Dead Sea Scrolls was such a group. The Talmud speaks of R. Shimon bar Yochai in similar terms. Having lived for thirteen years in a cave, he could not bear to see people engaged in such earthly pursuits as ploughing a field. Maimonides speaks of people who live as hermits in the desert to escape the corruptions of society (Laws of ethical character, 6: 1; Eight Chapters, ch. 4). But these were the exceptions, not the rule. This is not the destiny of Israel, to live outside time and space in ashrams or monasteries as the world’s recluses. Far from being the supreme height of faith, such a fear of freedom and its responsibilities is – according to both the Gerer and Lubavitcher Rebbe – the sin of the spies.

There is a voice within the tradition, most famously identified with R. Shimon bar Yochai, that regards engagement with the world as fundamentally incompatible with the heights of spirituality. But the mainstream held otherwise. “Torah study without an occupation will in the end fail and lead to sin” (Avot 2:2). “One who makes his mind up to study Torah and not to work but to live on charity, profanes the name of God, brings the Torah into contempt, extinguishes the light of religion, brings evil upon himself, and deprives himself of life hereafter” (Maimonides, Laws of Torah Study 3:10).

The spies did not want to contaminate Judaism by bringing it into contact with the real world. They sought the eternal childhood of God’s protection and the endless honeymoon of His all-embracing love. There is something noble about this desire, but also something profoundly irresponsible that demoralised the people and provoked God’s anger. For the Jewish project – the Torah as the constitution of the Jewish nation under the sovereignty of God – is about building a society in the land of Israel that so honours human dignity and freedom that it will one day lead the world to say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people” (Deut. 4:6).

The Jewish task is not to fear the real world but to enter and transform it.

That is what the spies did not understand. Do we – Jews of faith – understand it even now?