

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Sh'lach')

They were a small group of men with a mission. The year was 1940, and Jews by the tens of thousands were being herded into the ghettos of Nazi-occupied Europe, and while the Nazi hierarchy was meeting to determine the 'final solution to the Jewish problem', this small group was preparing the groundwork for what they believed would be the influx of refugees who would need a home and a place to call their own.

It is hard to imagine the vision required for a group of Jews in 1940 to believe that there was a need to create new towns and villages in the barren lands that were years away from becoming the State of Israel, but these young men and women believed, against all odds, that they were on the threshold of the fulfillment of a two thousand year old dream, and that at long last, after so many years of wandering, the Jewish people were ready to begin coming home.

The infamous British 'White Paper' severely limiting Jewish immigration to the land of Israel was in full force, and a scant 7,500 Jews, desperate to get out of Europe would be allowed into the country. Surrounded by hostile Arabs, facing a heavy-handed British mandate, openly resistant to their efforts, and confronted with barren hills, desert valleys, and swamps, these young Jews were determined to create a home out of what for two thousand years had been a barren wasteland, home only to marauding bands of thieves and wild animals.

They were looking for a place they could call their own, that no one would contest, and they had come to the mountains of Hebron, south of Jerusalem to see if there was land that could become livable.

The area had not been settled since the fall of the great Bar Kochba rebellion in the year 135 C.E., though some had tried. Years earlier, in the twenties, and again in the early thirties, small groups of Jews had tried to make a go of it, but the Arab riots of 1929 and 1936 had put an end to their efforts, leaving only loss and pain in their wake.

A fellow by the name of Holtzmann had bought land in the area in the thirties, and a collective farm (kibbutz) had been founded named Kefar Etzion (Etz means wood in Hebrew, a translation of the Yiddish 'Holtz'), though there was nothing left of that effort, save the legal paperwork that made it Jewish land. But these men were not thinking about legal strategies; they had much more real concerns.

People thought they were mad; but they came anyway, to spy out the area and see if they could make it work. And they discovered that the people were right; the land was filled with boulders and hard rock; completely untamable, the experts said. The winters were harsh, often making the roads, such as they were, impassable, and that they would find themselves in between the very large Arab populations of Beit Lechem to the North, and Hebron to the South.

But they came anyway, because they had to see it for themselves. They walked the mountains and breathed in the fresh air and saw firsthand the accumulated desolation of the ancient Roman destruction, which had left everything destroyed and barren for so long.

After not one, but two major Jewish revolts in less than seventy years, the Roman Emperor Hadrian decided enough was enough. He was determined to put an end to this spirit of Jewish independence, and

in what became known as the Hadrianic persecutions, systematically ploughed over and destroyed every last vestige of Jewish existence in the land.

Eighteen hundred years later, these young men with a mission found the terraces destroyed, the fields filled with rocks and weeds, and only the barest remnant of the Jewish villages that had once dotted the hilltops of this area.

Only the caves, where tens of thousands of Jews had been forced to live in hiding, remained.

But something about these barren hilltops moved them, and against all the odds, despite the wise advice of all around them urging them to abandon what seemed to be madness, the Etzion Bloc, which would soon become four different Jewish villages, nestled in the hills of Judea, was born.

What must it have felt like, to be standing on those cold and windy hilltops, looking around at a seemingly uninhabitable wasteland surrounded by hostile Arabs and cut off from the rest of the country? They cleared the boulders of those mountains with their hands, hauling dirt and rock with donkeys and leaving their families for an entire year, having decided that the land and the climate were too treacherous and difficult for mothers and children to join as yet.

They believed in something so large and so powerful, that nothing could deter them from their dream. They were on a mission to see if the land their ancestors had left behind so long ago could become once again, their home. And where others saw only rocks and weeds, they saw a vibrant and living Jewish community in a modern State of Israel.

They were mad, of course, but they were right, and today a four lane highway with the largest bridge and tunnel system in Israel, connects nearly thirty thousand people in the Gush Etzion and Hebron areas to Jerusalem, a mere fifteen minute drive away. And this dream, along with all the other dreams that make up what is today the State of Israel, began with a small group on a fact-finding mission to spy out the land that they would one day call home.

This week's portion, *Sh'lach*, is all about just such a mission, which took place over three thousand years ago, when a small band of men set forth from the desert to see if the land **their** ancestors had left behind so long ago could become once again, their home.

Only this time, it didn't quite work out that way; or did it?

Nearly the entire portion speaks of this fateful mission, which has become known as the 'sin of the spies'. From the decision to send them out, to the description of what their mission was meant to be, all the way through to their return, the report they gave, and its consequences; this week's portion is all about a mission to spy out the land, which seems to have culminated in disaster.

What is strangest about this entire story is why this mission needed to take place at all, and what these men were really trying to accomplish in the first place?

The idea that the Jewish people, having witnessed the miracles of the Exodus from Egypt, culminating in the splitting of the sea and the miraculous revelation at Sinai, would need a mission at all is nothing short of incredible. Was their memory so short that they needed to see for themselves that the land G-d says He is bringing them to could indeed be conquered? And despite the fact that G-d seems to be commanding Moshe to send the spies (*Bamidbar* 13:1-2) the words of the verse suggest otherwise:

*"Send **for you** men who will travel the land..." (13:2)*

Indeed, **Rashi** points out that G-d is telling Moshe:

"Send these men according to your opinion; I am not commanding you to send them, but if you want, then send them." (Rashi 13:2)

Rabbinic tradition (along with a comparison of the story as retold by Moshe to the second generation in Devarim 1:20-30) makes it very clear that this was an idea that stemmed from the people, and not from G-d. Yet it is equally clear that both G-d and Moshe seemed to go along with the plan. In fact, in Devarim 1: 23, Moshe says, *"the idea was good in my eyes"*, which leaves us wondering: what was the idea that at least seemed to Moshe to be a good one?

Was it simply that leadership, just like parenting, sometimes means letting a person make his or her own mistakes, and follow their own path, or was there actually something potentially valuable in this mission which seems to have gone so wrong? What value could there be in spying out a land that G-d had already promised they would conquer?

In previous Torah bytes it was suggested that the problem of the spies was not that they did not believe Hashem could conquer the land, which would have been absurd, it was rather precisely that they knew Hashem could conquer the land. The spies' challenge was not in G-d's abilities but in their own. Once they entered the land of Israel, it was clear the Jewish people would enter into a deeper partnership with Hashem, and the overt miracles such as the Manna from heaven and heavenly clouds would cease.

The Jews would have to fight to earn the right to live in the land of Israel, as witness in the book of Joshua once the Jewish people enter the land. And even when they succeeded in their military conquest of the land, no less challenging would be the agricultural conquest that would follow.

The Jews in the desert were, in a sense, living in the Garden of Eden. Now they would have to work for a living, plowing and sowing and reaping and threshing to receive their daily bread. Farming is hard work, with little time for spiritual pursuits that were so naturally a part of the desert experience when the Jewish people had such a direct relationship with G-d.

The question of the spies was simply: 'are we ready to leave the Yeshiva, and head out into the world?' And the message of the story we learned is that you eventually have to be willing to head out into the world, because all the learning of Torah and spiritual growth is meaningless if it does not get out into the world to make a difference.

All of which brings us back to our initial question: If this were indeed the challenge of the spies, how would going on a mission to spy out the land be a 'good idea' in any way? Wouldn't it simply prove their point?

In fact, a close look at the spies' report seems to support this contention. They had lots of good things to say about the land. It was, in their eyes, *"A land flowing milk and honey"*, and with wonderful fruit (13:27). But it did not change the fact that the people there were strong, and conquest would be a challenge, and it did nothing to allay their fears regarding what would happen to the spiritual level of a people who were only a year out of Egyptian slavery. They needed, according to the spies, more time to grow on their own, before taking on the world.

So what was the purpose of this mission, and what was it Moshe thought was a 'good idea'?

Perhaps one way of gaining a deeper understanding of the mission of these spies, is to compare it to that second famous mission which the Rabbis chose as this week's *Haftarah* (the prophetic portion Jews began reading every week when the Romans forbade us to study Torah on pain of death), which is always a clue to what Jewish tradition believed was the essence of the weekly Torah portion.

The Jewish people are again on the verge of entering the land of Israel, after forty years of wandering in the desert. Only this is the second generation, most of whom were born in freedom, and are thus no longer burdened with the mentality of a slave generation.

Poised on the banks of the Jordan River, beneath the mountains of Moab opposite the city of Jericho (*Devarim* 34:1), the mantle of leadership is passed to Joshua, now given the chance to make it right. Hopefully, this time, things will be different. Yet, at first glance it seems that Joshua is about to repeat the same mistakes the previous generation made.

In this week's Haftarah, taken from the second chapter of the book of Joshua, once again the Jewish people are sending men to spy out the land. When considering that Joshua himself was one of the original spies and thus has firsthand experience of what a mistake such a mission turned out to be, this is something which demands an explanation.

After all they have gone through, how can there be such a lack of faith in G-d's promise that He will give the land into their hands (Joshua 1: 2)?

Indeed, G-d tells Joshua right at the beginning of the book:

"Arise, and cross this Jordan (river), you and all this people, to the land that I give you."

So why is there a need for spies? How can they risk the same debacle that ended so tragically forty years earlier?

A closer look, however, reveals that the mission initiated by Joshua was in fact a very different experience from the spies Moshe sent in the desert, and considering that this second mission actually culminated in success, understanding the difference between both of these missions may help reveal what was behind them, and what they really accomplished.

There are essentially four major differences between the two spy missions:

1. While Moshe is commanded (or at least G-d allows him) to send out the spies in our portion (*Bamidbar* 13: 2), there is no mention of any command or even dialogue between G-d and Joshua regarding such a mission. Did Joshua make this decision himself? Or, as many commentaries suggest, was it superfluous to include this understanding, as Joshua would never, given the previous history on the subject, have made such a decision alone?
2. Moshe sends twelve men; one from each tribe, and the Torah takes a lot of time describing who they are, and their high position. In fact, they were the *Nesi'im*, the Princes of the tribes, and are listed by name. Joshua, on the other hand, sends only two men, and although tradition (**Rashi**; *Yehoshua* 1:4 quotes the *Midrash Tanchuma*) tells us they were **Calev** (one of the original spies who, along with Yehoshua did the right thing) and **Pinchas** (grandson of Aaron and a hero himself, see *Bamidbar* 25:1-9), the text never tells us who they are.

Was this simply a matter of expedience, or was this part of a difference in the nature of the mission? There is no doubt that strategically there is a world of difference between a twelve-man reconnaissance squad and a pair of infiltrators.

3. Moshe's mission, from beginning to end, was very public. The men are described, the people clearly know they are going, and are in fact involved in the initial request to send them (*Devarim* 1:22), and of course, the spies return to give a report before the entire congregation (*Bamidbar* 13: 26).

In the book of *Yehoshua*, however, the entire mission was top secret. In fact, the verse describes Yehoshua sending these two men on their mission as "Cheresh" which means secretly. And when they return they report directly to Yehoshua (2:24) with no one the wiser. Why the difference? Was this a lesson learned, or again, a clue to the different nature of the two missions?

4. Most startling of all is the difference in the actual execution of their respective journeys. The twelve spies of Moshe toured the entire land of Israel, from North to South, and East to West, (*Bamidbar* 13: 27-29) for forty days. Indeed, it appears both from the text, as well as traditional commentary (According to Rashi on 13:22 comments that Calev alone goes to Hebron, implying the spies were all together) that they all traveled together, rather than splitting up to be less conspicuous. In fact, according to the Midrash (Rashi 13: 32), G-d performed a miracle causing the Canaanites to be distracted by plague precisely because the spies were so conspicuous as a large group.

By contrast, the spies of Joshua went only to Jericho, and in fact did not even see the city itself as they were 'discovered' before leaving the home of Rachav where they had just arrived (Joshua 2:2-3). After escaping from Rachav's home (where she hid them on the night of their arrival up on her roof) they went directly to the hills above Jericho (which were clearly visible from across the Jordan in the Israelite camp) where they hid for three days before returning directly back to Joshua (2:22-23). So in fact they saw absolutely nothing! What sort of spies were these? What exactly did they accomplish, and why did they bother going at all?

The text itself actually alludes to the difference between these two missions in a manner that may help us understand what is really going on here.

In *Bamidbar*, the spies of Moshe are never actually called spies. The Hebrew word for spies is *Meraglim*, but these twelve men were called *Tarim* (explorers). And despite the fact that the commentaries do describe them as *Meraglim*, the text never does. In fact, their mission is described not as *Leragel*, which would mean to spy, but rather "*Latur*" (13:2), which really means to explore. And when Moshe actually sends them out (13:17) it again suggests that they will explore as opposed to spying out, the land. (And this continues throughout the rest of the description of their mission: **13**:21, 25,32, and **14**: 6,7,34,36,38.)

In the book of Joshua, however, these men are not described as explorers, but as *Meraglim* (2:1), and their mission is not *Latur*, but rather *Lachpor*, which means literally to dig, or to seek out (2: 2, 3).

These were, in fact, two very different missions. What was the difference between them?

From a military perspective, the fact that Moshe sent twelve men, especially when considering that they toured the land together, makes no sense if their mission was to spy. If anything, such a large and conspicuous group (there is no allusion in the text to any attempt they made to disguise themselves) is less capable of accomplishing such a mission.

Twelve men, taken from each of the tribes means that they represent the entire Jewish people. The mission Moshe sends these men on is not really about Canaanite strength and confidence as much as it is about Jewish weakness and doubt.

When Joshua sends his spies he is doing it as a military commander. As such, it is a secret mission, with a very clear and focused goal. It is all about the coming battle to conquer the land, something that is not within the purview of the people at all.

Moshe, on the other hand, is trying to send a message to the Jewish people. If indeed the Jews are struggling with the decision to enter the land of Israel and begin, as it were, to 'get their hands dirty', then a detailed report of how beautiful the land is would do nothing to mitigate the challenge they felt they faced. Precisely because the land was so beautiful it would prove to be such a distraction in their attempts to retain the spiritual level they had achieved in the secluded wilderness of the desert, where there was nothing to concentrate on but their relationship with G-d.

And a detailed description of defenses was irrelevant to them, if they truly believed that they were in the hands of G-d. If a deeper understanding of the enemy they faced made them realize just how challenging the war would be, it would only serve to demonstrate how difficult it would be to retain the level of spiritual growth they were achieving in the desert.

There was only one valid reason to send these *Nesi'im*, the Princes of the entire Jewish people in to explore the land of Israel, and that was to experience what an impact the land of Israel itself has on all those who dwell therein.

If they could balk at the prospect of leaving the spiritual high of the desert to enter the land of Israel, it could only have been because their knowledge and understanding of Israel was all in the mind. They had heard the stories, and knew the history of Israel, but they had never seen it, much less experienced it. They knew about Israel in their heads, but they needed to feel it with their hearts. Kind of like the difference between hearing *about* a great song and listening to the CD in surround sound.

Moshe commands them to "*see the land: how is it?*" (13:18), and throughout the tasks that he entrusts them with, he clearly wants them to see how wonderful the land is, and what it means to live there, not by hearing about it, but by walking through it.

And this, one cannot define or explain; this is something a person needs to experience. Even today, it is impossible to explain to someone who has never visited the land of Israel, what a magical and powerful place it is. After all, how different can it be? If you've been to Switzerland or Colorado, haven't you seen it all?

And yet, there is a spiritual majesty to Israel born of four thousand years of history, and a mysterious gift Hashem gave us there that can never be explained, but neither, for anyone who has ever been there, can it ever be denied. And this challenge is not, incidentally, limited to people who have never been to Israel, but exists as well for people who have not recently been there, especially when they are in dialogue with those who either are there or have just returned. A parent hearing the experiences of a child who has just come home from a year studying in Israel, as an example, cannot help but miss a part of the discussion, because they themselves were not just there.

And this is of course true for any spiritual experience which one can attempt to describe, but really needs to be experienced.

And as relates to the specific challenge of the spies, the Jewish people need to understand that spiritual growth can only go so far inside the study halls of the desert ('Yeshiva') experience. To be sure, the Jewish people begin their journey with a little time in the desert, much as any growth and self-development begins with a certain retreat and introspection.

But ultimately, one can only grow so far alone in the desert. Eventually, we need to be willing to roll up our sleeves and bring the Torah and the spiritual growth we have hopefully achieved into the fields where it can be harvested to make the world a better place.

In fact, the word "*LaTur*" may even be related to the word "*Yitaron*", which means advantage, which was what Moshe (and G-d) wanted to show the Jewish people: that there was, for them as a people, an advantage to this place above all other lands.

This lesson was not lost on Yehoshua (Joshua) who was one of the two (of twelve) spies who understood what Moshe, his teacher, was trying to say.

So, forty years later, he does not need explorers to give this message over, nor does he need a command from G-d to begin the process. It is abundantly clear to him that if it is time to enter the land, he and the people along with him must be willing to fight for it. (Indeed, it was Joshua who, in leading the battle against Amalek, understood this forty years earlier.)

And this is why it was not necessary for the people to know of Joshua's mission, much less who these two spies were. Unlike the mission of Moshe's spies (where having highly respected and trusted individuals was crucial to communicate this message to the entire Jewish people), this mission was for Joshua, the Commander, and for no one else.

Lastly, this is why the twelve spies toured the entire land together, so that all of them could tell the entire Jewish people: regardless of which tribe you are in, and where your portion will ultimately be, the experience of reconnecting with the land of our fathers will be reason enough to leave the desert behind.

And why indeed, did Yehoshua need a mission at all? It is interesting to note that the only real piece of information gleaned from the journey of his two spies to Yericho, is that the people of Canaan are terrified of the Jewish people, and of their G-d. Perhaps Yehoshua knew they would enter the land and had no doubt they would conquer it. His question was, is it yet time? And the fact that the nations of Canaan so feared their coming, told him it was time for the Jewish people to go home.

Ultimately, the story of the spies is not about what we see, but about how we choose to see it. And this may be why the spies failed; Hashem will only give us what we see, but He will never give us the 'how we see it'. That is really up to us.

Interestingly, this may explain why the portion concludes with the mitzvah of *Tzitzit*, (the fringes on four cornered garments) whose purpose, as described in the verse (15:39) is "*VeLo' Taturu Acharei...*", "*And you shall not explore after your hearts and minds*", a mitzvah which is all about remembering who we are, and understanding that how we choose to see the world is essential to who we become in the world.

The Princes, born in Egypt and having come of age in the slavery of Pharaoh, may just not have been ready to see what being in a place like Israel was all about. But forty years later, the second generation, living on a dream they had nurtured in the desert for forty years, were ready to put what they had learned to the test.

If you were to ask those men on that rocky barren hilltop in the Hebron hills what they saw that made them decide it was time to come home, I doubt they could tell you; because it wasn't something you can explain; it was and is something you have to experience.

This is our greatest challenge today, three thousand years later. Where are we going? And how do we choose to see where we already are?

So often Judaism has become a series of explanations broken down to books about G-d and details of ritual, which while all important, fall short of what the experience is really meant to be. Kind of like the relationships in our lives; on paper, a marriage may be magnificent, but if we have lost the joy and the love hidden in the experience, then we may be married, but we are not really experiencing the marriage.

We need to rediscover the *experience* that *Shabbat* and *Tefillah* (Prayer) and even a kosher slice of pizza were always meant to be. We need to take the opportunity we all have to rediscover our relationship with the place we all are meant to call home, the land of Israel, and experience it in the most meaningful way we can, with our feet and eyes, and not just with our internet browsers and check books.

And most of all, we need to send ourselves out, as the first words in this week's portion suggest, to explore (or to re-explore) the beauty of 'the land' (representative of Judaism in general) as it was always meant to be.

Shabbat Shalom,

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