

Succeeding by Overcoming Fear of Change

A D'var Torah on *Parashat Sh'lach-L'cha* (Num. 13:1 – 15:41)

By Sandy Schachter

“Sh'lach-lcha anashim v'yaturu et-eretz K'na'an....”
“Send forth men so that they may scout the land of Canaan....”

In *Parashat Sh'lach-L'cha*, God directs Moses to send twelve spies, one from each ancestral tribe, to scout the land of Canaan to determine the efficacy of the land, military, and natural resources. After 40 days they return and report to the whole community their findings. Ten of the spies report that the land is flowing with milk and honey but that the people are powerful and their cities are fortified.¹ Moreover, “All the people that we saw there are men of great size ... We looked like grasshoppers to ourselves and so we must have looked to them.”²

They warn the people that the Israelites will lose the battle if they go forward. They discourage the people despite avowals by God and Moses that the Israelites would be successful in conquering the land.

Two of the spies, Caleb and Joshua, disagree with the findings by the other ten spies and encourage the people to enter the land. Caleb and Joshua tell the people that, if they have faith in God, they will prevail.³

The people side with the ten men who give the negative report, and they beg Moses to let them return to Egypt. Because of their lack of faith, God tells Moses that the people will wander in the desert for 40 years and only their children, led by Joshua and Caleb, will survive and conquer the land.⁴

There is a Midrash that suggests that God was upset with the spies, not for their own self-perception but for projecting that self-perception onto others:

“I shall forgive them this remark,” said God. But when they said: “And so we were in their sight,” God asked: “Did you know how I made you appear in their sight? Who can say that you did not appear in their sight as angels? What have you brought upon yourselves?”⁵

We set ourselves up for failure when we project our insecurities onto others.

¹ Numbers 13:27-28.

² Numbers 13:32-33.

³ Numbers 14:6-9.

⁴ Numbers 14:28-35.

⁵ Midrash *Numbers Rabbah* 16:11.

How often does fear of the unknown immobilize us? The ten scouts were fearful of what lay ahead and thought that being slaves in Egypt was a better alternative. They distorted their view of things, forgetting how oppressed they were in Egypt, and wanted to go back to what they knew.

How many of us stay in unsatisfying relationships, jobs, and friendships because we fear change? Why do some people choose to remain stagnant in their lives? Why do some people see the glass as half empty while others see it as half full?

It all comes down to how we view ourselves. If we see ourselves as “grasshoppers,” we will lack the energy and confidence necessary to move forward in our lives and to better our communities.

Rabbi Barton Lee states that the most potent words in this parashah are voiced by Caleb: “*Ki yachol nuchal lah* — “For we shall overcome it.” Theodor Herzl interpreted these words to mean “If you will it, it is no dream.”⁶ The confidence that the early Zionists had in building up Israel into what it is today arose from thinking positively and believing in themselves and their cause.

This parashah teaches us that if we believe in ourselves and have faith in God, we can live satisfying, complete lives that have purpose. By optimistically embracing change — through events that we choose as well as through those we have no control over — we are opening ourselves up to wonderful possibilities and opportunities that can be exciting, challenging, and fulfilling in our individual lives and in our communities.

⁶ Commentary on *Parashat Sh'lach-L'cha* by Rabbi Barton G. Lee, Hillel Jewish Student Center, Arizona State University, 2001.