

“The Parsha Discussion” by Rabbi Alex Israel

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Shelach Lecha. A Question of Attitude



This week we read of the Spies who come back with a negative report from their forty-day tour of the land of Canaan. They frighten the nation with reports of the formidable strength of the Canaanites, and suggest that the nation return en-masse to Egypt. This results in the punishment of forty years, meaning that the Exodus generation died in the wilderness and only their children entered the Promised Land.

What is fascinating here, is that the facts here are not disputed. Only the attitude.

The Spies say:

We came to the land you sent us to; it does indeed flow with milk and honey... the people who inhabit the country are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large; moreover, we saw the children of the giants there. (Bamidbar 13:27-28)

The Spies draw a conclusion:

“We cannot attack that people, for it is stronger than we.” (v.31)

And then they expose what really generated that conclusion. It is a sense of fear and intimidation: “The country that we traversed and scouted is one that devours its settlers. All the people that we saw in it are men of great size.”(v.32) These lines are clearly an exaggeration; just a few lines before, the people were merely “powerful” and a select few were giants. Now, “ALL the people ... are of great size!” They continue: “we looked like grasshoppers to ourselves, and so we must have looked to them.” These lines expose their low self-esteem, their intimidation. Because they see themselves as grasshoppers, everyone around them look like giants!

Actually, their facts are never disputed. When Moses addresses the nation as they are to enter the land (in the 40th year) he says:

You are about to cross the Jordan to go in and dispossess nations **greater and more populous** than you: great cities with **walls sky-high**; a people great and tall, **the giants**... and you have heard it said, “Who can stand up to the children of giants?” Know then this day that the Lord your God is crossing at your helm, a devouring fire; it is He who will wipe them out. He will subdue them before you... (Devarim 9:1-3)

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Moses agrees. Canaan is formidable: Fortified cities, a nation more populous than yourselves, giants. But, says Moses, we can do it because God will assist.

This is similar to Joshua and Caleb’s retort to the Spies:

“The land that we traversed and scouted is an exceedingly good land. If the Lord is pleased with us, He will bring us into that land ... Fear not the people of the country, for they are our prey: their protection has departed from them, but the Lord is with us. Have no fear of them!” (Bamidbar 14:8-9)

- What makes the difference between the Spies’ intimidation and Joshua and Caleb’s confidence?
- Is this just a question of personality? - Some people are optimists, others pessimists. Some see the glass half-full, others see the glass half-empty.
- How is it that some people see a project as feasible whereas others condemn it to failure?
- Is this about faith? Courage?

Attitude is the key here. But where does our determination come from? What is its source? Some have claimed that the issue here is how desperate one is to succeed:

“It is absolutely impossible to predict in advance whether an army will succeed in the mission with which it has been charged ... History has shown, and Jewish history specifically ... that a small military force was able to achieve formidable victories because the fighters felt that their back was to the wall, and they were fighting a war of survival, without options. In the absence of an alternative, they rise to victory. And, great and mighty armies, whose soldiers felt that their fight was non-essential, crumpled and disintegrated in battle.” (Rav Yaakov Medan. Megadim vol.10)

Rav Medan suggests that the Spies allowed Israel to feel, wrongly, that they had a choice, that there were other options. In this situation, Israel chose to avoid conflict. But was there another viable option?

In this regard, I recall a famous speech of Golda Meir from January 1948 where she talks about the determination of pre-State Israel to succeed in war at all costs:

“The spirit of our young people is such that no matter how many Arabs invade the country, their spirit will not falter ... The Yishuv in Palestine will fight in the Negev and will fight in Galilee and will fight on the outskirts of Jerusalem until the very end. You cannot decide whether we should fight or not. We will. The Jewish community in Palestine will raise no white flag for the Mufti. That decision is taken. Nobody can change it.”

Or as Ben-Gurion put it: **In Israel, in order to be a realist, you must believe in miracles.**

- In the end, does this boil down to a question of motivation?
- What motivation does one need to fight against all odds?

Shabbat Shalom!