

Parshat Shelach
What We Can and Can't Do
Dr. Tamar Marvin - Class of 2024

“Don’t tell me what I can’t do!” are desperate words that become the by-words, and thematic throughline, of the character John Locke (yes, named for the Enlightenment philosopher) in the television series *Lost*. Locke, paralyzed from the waist down, is sitting in the office of an Australian tour company. Outside is a stalling bus, waiting for the go-ahead to take a group of enterprising tourists on a walkabout of the Australian outback. He’s being upbraided by the tour operator. “You misrepresented yourself,” says the tour operator. Locke insists, rather ridiculously, that his paralysis is a non-issue. “Well,” replies the operator, “unfortunately, it *is* an issue for our insurance company.” The waiting bus pulls out as Locke insists, “You don’t know who you’re dealing with. Don’t tell me what I can’t do! This is destiny. I’m supposed to do this. *Don’t tell me what I can’t do.*” We want to be on Locke’s side. But we can’t. It’s called reality.

In Parshat Shelach, the Jewish people are faced with a similarly hopeless situation: of the twelve scouts that have been sent to reconnoiter the Land of Israel, ten are in emphatic agreement that conquest is impossible. The Canaanites who occupy the Land are superior in force, towering giants of men, and no less, the very land “devours its inhabitants” (אֲכָלָת יֹנְסְפֵיָהּ , Bamidbar 13:32). Despite direct assurances by God that the Land is theirs to inherit, despite having witnessed the miraculous defeat of their world’s superpower, Egypt, with their own eyes, the Jewish people weep in spiritual exhaustion. They feel, in other words, a lot like a paralyzed man trying to go on a backcountry walking tour. Unlike Locke, their response is: “I can’t do this.” Can we really fault the tour company? Can we fault the Jewish people?

What happens next tells us that, actually, not only can the people fault themselves, they've committed a grave *chet*—a missing of the mark. As a consequence, God declares: “In this very wilderness shall your carcasses drop...while your children roam the wilderness for forty years, suffering for your faithlessness” (Bamidbar 14:29). So severe is this transgression that it garners a name within Jewish tradition—*Chet ha-Meraglim*, the “Sin of the Spies”—similar to *Chet ha-Egel*, the “Sin of the Golden Calf.” Like the latter event, *Chet ha-Meraglim* is a hinge of history upon which future events turn. The state of the world is irrevocably altered; *Chazal* tell us in Taanit 29a (and elsewhere) that the very night on which the people gave up and cried in light of the scouts' report was the ninth of Av. The occasion of Tisha be-Av was thereafter instituted as a day of destruction and mourning for the Jewish people.

The story of Parshat Shelach holds a tension that each of us must navigate in our lives. On the one hand, we do ourselves no favors by denying reality. We must accept our human limitations, both collective and individual, if we're to get anything done. We know, with our retrospective vision, that the eventual conquest of the Land in the time of Yehoshua and Shoftim and beyond would be challenging, unfinished business. We're not wrong to be intimidated. On the other hand, God's judgment stands: we should have believed in ourselves. The generation that came out of Egypt is *incapable* of this kind of internal change; that is why it cannot enter the Land. This is also why the consequence stays in effect even as the people are forgiven for their lack of faith: In response to Moshe's entreaty, God says, “I have forgiven, as you have asked” (סָלַחְתִּי כְדַבְרְךָ, Bamidbar 14:20). These specific words constitute, in fact, the soul-regenerating absolution we tell ourselves liturgically on Yom Kippur. This is true; we have been forgiven. And yet, that cannot change our internal state. Only we can do that.

So how are we to know when our paralysis is real, and when, with God and Locke, we should be insisting, “Don't tell me what I can't do”? John Locke, the philosopher, is



associated with the school of British empiricism. Empiricism is a branch of epistemology, the study of how we know what we know. It claims that knowledge arises from sensory data—from the information our physical senses convey to us. But Locke (the philosopher) is perhaps best known, outside of the political philosophy for which Thomas Jefferson held him in such high esteem, for his work on subjectivity and the self. In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, he writes,

The other fountain from which experience furnisheth the understanding with ideas is, the perception of the operations of our own mind within us... This source of ideas every man has wholly in himself; and though it be not sense, as having nothing to do with external objects, yet it is very like it, and might properly enough be called internal sense.¹

Locke thus privileges internal ways of knowing as much as the data we get from external, physical sensation. In the end, the *Lost* character Locke is carried onto a plane by a pair of flight attendants, a return flight booked as a small concession on the part of the touring company. But then something weird happens. The plane crashes, and Locke (the character) awakens in the wreckage on a proverbial desert island (wilderness, again). The camera focuses on his foot. He wiggles his toes. Then he gets up and walks. Locke was right. What mattered was his internal sense.

Abravanel, who gives lengthy consideration to *Chet ha-Meraglim*, suggests that the people's doubts, stoked by their reasonable reliance upon the scouts, are not quite so extreme as their words suggest, "Oh, that we would have died in Egypt!" On the contrary, their terror is colored by very real fears of suffering, of women and children being sold into slavery. Better not to try at all than to die trying:

¹ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), Book II, ch. 1.



רוצה לומר מה התועלת בניסים ובנפלאות שעשה הש"י ביציאת מצרים ומה התועלת בניסי המדבר כי הנה כל הדברים הולכים אחר התכלית וכיון שהתכלית הזו הוא רע שנמות ולא נירש את הארץ יותר טוב היה שמתנו במצרים בלי עמל המדבר וטרחו.

This means to say, what is the purpose of miracles and wonders that G-d, may He be blessed, did during the exodus from Egypt? What is the purpose for the miracles in the desert, given that all things are adduced teleologically, and this telos is an evil one, that we shall die and not inherit the Land? Thus it would be better that we had died in Egypt without toil in the desert wanderings and its exertions. (Abravanel on Bamdibar 13:32)

Without knowing that the end is a happy one, and in fact having cause to believe that it is doomed, it seems better to not even try.

This is precisely what *Chet ha-Meraglim* comes to tell us: that trying *does* matter. The people's true sin was not their belief in the reports of the faithless scouts, but their failure to believe in the process. Their poignant expression of desire to return to the bondage and idolatry of life in Egypt reflects their inability to change. For this reason, the *Dor ha-Midbar* (Generation of the Wilderness) cannot enter the Land. It is not a punishment but a consequence. The very children whom they feared would fall into enemy hands, who yet bear an openness to growth and change, become the inheritors of the ancient promise.





Born in Israel and raised in the United States, Dr. Tamar Marvin is a scholar, writer, and educator currently based in Los Angeles. She holds a Ph.D. in Medieval and Early Modern Jewish Studies from the Jewish Theological Seminary and a B.A. in Literature and Journalism from New York University. This year she looks forward to serving as the congregational intern at B'nai David Judea. As a 2022 Vaitchtov writing fellow, she is at work on a piece exploring core halachic concepts. Tamar is also a 2022-23 iCenter fellow pursuing a master's concentration in Israel education. Tamar's writing has appeared in academic and broader media, and she is active online promoting Jewish learning. She has developed virtual learning experiences since 2013, teaching and lecturing, both in person and online, in a number of university and Jewish settings, including American Jewish University, the Wexner Heritage Foundation, and the American Sephardi Federation.

Tamar is passionate about creating access to foundational Jewish texts—in their full complexity—for all who wish to approach them. Her website is trmarvin.org.