

Parshat Shelach-Lecha
The Failure of Leadership
Hannah Ruimy - Class of 2025

Parashat Shelakh-Lekha, the fourth parshah of the Book of Bamidbar, leads us into perplexity in more ways than one.

Moshe sends a delegation to explore the Promised Land. This delegation leaves the Paran desert with a fairly explicit roadmap. They are to explore the following questions::

וְאֶת־הָעָם הַיֹּשֵׁב עָלֶיהָ

How are the people who are settled on this land? This is the first and most important criterion: are these people educated, refined, cultured beings? The nature of this civilization will be measured based on this aspect.

וַיְמַהֲרֵם הָעָרִים אֲשֶׁר־הוּא יוֹשֵׁב בְּהֵנָה

How are the cities? Cities are also an ideal criterion of the level of development of a population, its level of education. Here, explorers will be able to check if the cities are fortified – which suggests a bellicose and seasoned nation.

וַיְמַהֲרֵם הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־הוּא יוֹשֵׁב בָּהּ

How is the land of this country? Cultivated soil is also an indication of the level of civilization of a people, but also the nature of agriculture, the country's ability to feed its inhabitants and, ultimately, ensure a stable future on earth.

The men who make up this delegation are not anonymous. The text gives specific information about them:

אִישׁ אֶחָד אִישׁ אֶחָד לְמִטָּה אֲבֹתָיו תִּשְׁלַחוּ כָּל נָשִׂיא בְּהֵם... כָּלֵם אֲנָשִׁים רָאשֵׁי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל הֵמָּה:

...one participant from each of their ancestral tribes, each one a chieftain among them.... **all of them being men of consequence.** leaders of the Israelites (Bamidbar 13:2-3)

Undeniably, the text insists on their status and traditional exegesis confirms what we feel when reading these verses:

כָּלֵם אֲנָשִׁים. כָּל אֲנָשִׁים שְׁבַמְקָרָא לְשׁוֹן חֲשִׁיבוֹת

ALL OF THEM WERE MEN — Wherever the term אנשים, “men”, is used in Scripture it is a term denoting worthiness. (Rashi, 13:3)

כָּלֵם אֲנָשִׁים אֲנָשֵׁי חֵיל

The word איש occurs in the sense of “man of valor” (Sforno 13:3)

The context is set: we expect to witness an exemplary mission. Unfortunately, nothing will happen as Moshe expected.

Upon their return, they give the people a fairly succinct account, quickly dismissing important issues. And they make a show of their feelings in front of their audience – which was absolutely not required of them:

וְהָאֲנָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר-עָלוּ עִמּוֹ אָמְרוּ לֹא נֹכַח לְעֵלוֹת אֶל-הָעָם כִּי-חֲזַק הוּא מִמֶּנּוּ: וַיֵּצִיאוּ דַבַּת הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר תָּרוּ אֹתָהּ אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר עָבְרָנוּ בָּהּ לְתוֹר אֹתָהּ אָרֶץ אֲכֻלֹת יוֹשְׁבֶיהָ הוּא וְכָל-הָעָם אֲשֶׁר-רָאינוּ בְּתוֹכָהּ: אֲנָשֵׁי מַדּוֹת: וְשֵׁם רָאינוּ אֶת-הַנְּפִילִים בְּנֵי עֲנָק מִן-הַנְּפִילִים וְנָהִי בְּעֵינֵינוּ כְּחַגְבִּים וְכֵן הָיִינוּ בְּעֵינֵיהֶם:

But the other men who had gone up with him said, “**We cannot attack that people**, for it is stronger than we.” Thus they spread calumnies among the Israelites about the land they had scouted, saying, “**The country** that we traversed and scouted **is one that devours its settlers**. All the people that we saw in it are of great size; we saw the Nephilim there—the Anakites are part of the Nephilim—and **we looked like grasshoppers to ourselves, and so we must have looked to them.**” (Bamidbar 13:31-33)

Is this what they were asked to do? Here are men who are described as leaders, tribal leaders and who unpack (I dare say, without modesty) their feelings, their fears, their childish anxieties in front of the people.

What is a leader? What qualities are expected to be found in a leader? He gives confidence to his teams, he carries within him the ability to surpass others, he never escapes difficulties and on the contrary, finds solutions to the issues that arise. A leader does not hesitate to take risks and finally, he has an awareness of his strength without being arrogant. Our explorers act in a manner that is the opposite of this description!

Before we even reproach them for their inappropriate words to describe the land they went to explore, we are incredulous about how they perceive themselves, the lack of respect for their own person:

וְנָהִי בְּעֵינֵינוּ כְּחַגְבִּים וְכֵן הָיִינוּ בְּעֵינֵיהֶם:

and **we looked like grasshoppers to ourselves, and so we must have looked to them.**
(Bamidbar 13:-33)

Their own perception impacts the perception that others have of them: "It is because we perceive ourselves as grasshoppers that these inhabitants of Canaan have perceived us like this!" The text is very precise.

But, our rabbis who comment on this text also point out their false claims :

מְרַגְלִים שֶׁקְרִי הוּוּ בְּשִׁלְמָא וְנָהִי בְּעֵינֵינוּ כְּחַגְבִּים לְחַיִּי אֶלָּא וְכֵן הָיִינוּ בְּעֵינֵיהֶם מִנָּא הוּוּ יְדַעִי
Rav Mesharshiya says: The spies were liars. Granted, to say: “We were like grasshoppers in our own eyes,” is well, but to say: “And so were we in their eyes,” from where could they have known this? (Sotah 35a)

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Another character in the biblical account harbors a self-image as a very inferior entity: it is our patriarch Avraham. He begins a conversation with Hashem – some say a prayer, in an attempt to save the ungodly inhabitants of Sodom and Amora. And, precisely, he justifies his intervention by his lowly status: **"I am ash and dust."** (Bereshit 18:27) So, what does this description of himself in front of Hashem mean?

Emmanuel Levinas¹ offers an explanation of the words of Patriarch Avraham:

... Avraham, already promoted father of a multitude of nations, already patriarch of universal humanity sees himself and calls himself "dust and ashes." What is the notion of a "self" that would have thus revealed if we can say an introspection without complacency for Avraham ... Lament where the misery of a human creature is confessed within a dialogue yet brought to the highest level. **Misery that turns out to be glory!** (Nouvelles lectures talmudiques, Emmanuel Levinas, Colloque des intellectuels juifs français, 1989)

Indeed, Avraham says, being ash and dust, I am capable of concern for my fellow human being. Levinas phrases it precisely: "with his after taste of ash and dust, with the conscience of his mortality, his finiteness remains a source of power, freedom, leisure, and the dignity of empathy and of concern for his fellow human being." In the end, in the Abrahamic narrative, it is the attitude in front of Hashem that requires from our Patriarch to erase his ego (in French « quant à soi ») in order to plead for men whose limited humanity still has to be demonstrated. **It is his very human conscience that forcefully confronts Hashem, and in this situation, he can be nothing but "ash and dust".**

Our explorers saw themselves as grasshoppers when they were expected to rise above the situation, to distance themselves from their feelings and to see themselves as giants in order to provide an objective description of what they saw. **They fail miserably, whereas their mission was to position themselves by the side of Hashem, and to enter a partnership with Hashem.**

As a last point and echo to my previous thoughts: when Hashem informs Abraham that he will receive the land of Israel as a heritage, he invites Abraham to become an explorer – the first explorer in Jewish history – and to embark upon a journey of discovery of the land :

קוּם וּלְרַחֵב אֶת אֲרָצְךָ בְּאֶרֶץ, לְאֶרְכָּהּ וּלְרֵחְבָּהּ

Arise, walk through the land in the length of it and in the breadth of it. (Bereshit 13:17)

Avraham goes into an active mode immediately, there is no space for doubt. He sets up his tent and builds an altar for Hashem – God's promise does not wait!

¹ Emmanuel Levinas (Kovno 1906-Paris 1995) is a French Jewish philosopher who was very influential for bringing Jewish Talmudic sources into the general philosophical dialogue after the Shoah. He is known for his humanist approach (« L'humanisme de l'Autre homme », « le Temps et l'Autre »), but also for his fascinating interpretation of Talmudic texts. He was also a major Jewish educator.

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As a conclusion, and in reference to Emmanuel Levinas's words – ("Misery that turns out to be glory"/ (« Misère qui se révèle gloire »), I would like to part with the following words:

Humility is associated with spiritual perfection. When humility effects depression it is defective; when it is genuine it inspires joy, courage, and inner dignity.

Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook, The Moral Principles, p. 176



Hannah Ruimy was born in Paris into a Hasidic family. After a Bachelor's degree in Clinical Psychology at René Descartes University, she studied in Israel and obtained a teaching degree from the Israeli Ministry of Education. She is passionate about Jewish education. Hannah taught high school classes in Yavné Paris. For three years, she directed ENIO-Gustave Leven, a middle class school in Paris. In 2017, she headed the Jewish Studies of the School Group. She has coordinated several educational curricula, in particular, for high schools, in France. Hannah is the educational manager of the Talmud Torah of the "Ohel Avraham" Community in Paris. In 2019, she won the Biblical Contest for adults in France.