

Parshat Shelach
Beyond Immediate Reality
Nomi Kaltmann - Class of 2023

"Send out for yourself men who will scout the Land of Canaan, which I am giving to the children of Israel. You shall send one man each for his father's tribe; each one shall be a chieftain in their midst."
(Bamidbar 13:2)

שְׁלַח לְךָ אֲנָשִׁים וַיִּתְּרוּ אֶת־אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן
אֲשֶׁר־אֲנִי נֹתֵן לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אִישׁ אֶחָד אִישׁ
אֶחָד לְמִטֵּה אָבִיתוֹ תִּשְׁלַחוּ כָּל נָשִׂיא בְּהֵם
(במדבר יג:ב)

This week Parshat Shlach opens with this instruction to Moshe to send spies to scout out the land of Israel. There are thousands of commentaries on the construct of this verse, with the superfluous word “לְךָ”-“for yourself” focusing on the fact that the spies were for the benefit of the people of Israel, not for God.

However, Midrash Tanchuma adds an extra insight into the timing of this story noting that it takes place immediately after the story of Miriam being stricken with leprosy (in last week’s Parsha) after speaking lashon hara about her brother Moshe and his wife. The spies’ mission, juxtaposed immediately after Miriam being punished shows the gravity of their sins. Having witnessed the enormity of Miriam speaking lashon hara, it is assumed that the spies would have learnt not engage in the same conduct.

It is interesting to note that the spies were not average rank and file community members, they were established leaders. In the three parshiot leading up to Shlach, the Nesiim (leaders) of each tribe are listed, each time with the same names. However, in this week’s Parsha new names are mentioned than the ones noted previously. Spying out the land of Israel required a sense of courage and daring spirit. Moshe was instructed by God to seek out volunteers who would reflect the cunning and skills required for this dangerous and important mission. Rashbam cites that the word “Nasi” is derived from the word “Nasa” which means “elevated” demonstrating that each of the volunteer spies had elevated themselves to volunteer for this important mission.

When considering this fact, there are several interesting reasons as to how such important men of stature came to malign the land of Israel. One possibility is that in the desert the Jewish people were enclosed in a bubble of protection and benevolence by God. They did not have to work, search for food, seek out shelter or want for anything. Everything they needed was taken care of directly by God. However, as it dawned on the people that entering the land of Israel would result in a return to standard earthly worries like work, farming, creating homes and shelter they became afraid that this life would interfere with their holy lives of dedicated Torah study and decided that, despite God’s plan, it would be better to remain in the wilderness and refrain from such earthly and mundane pursuits.

But I think the message from the spies is deeper. There was a beautiful meme that went viral a few years ago, from the writer Pablo Molinero, cited here in translation:

In a mother’s womb there are two babies. The first baby asked the other: “Do you believe in life after delivery?” The second baby replied, “Why, of course. There has to be something after delivery. Maybe we are here to prepare ourselves for what we will be later.” “Nonsense,” said the first. “There is no life after delivery. What would that life be?” “I don’t know, but there will be lighter than here. Maybe we will walk with our legs and eat from our mouths.” The doubting baby laughed. “This is absurd!”



Walking is impossible. And eat with our mouths? Ridiculous. The umbilical cord supplies nutrition. Life after delivery is to be excluded. The umbilical cord is too short.” The second baby held his ground. *“I think there is something and maybe it’s different than it is here.”* The first baby replied, *“No one has ever come back from there. Delivery is the end of life, and in the after-delivery it is nothing, but darkness and anxiety and it takes us nowhere.”* *“Well, I don’t know,”* said the twin, *“but certainly we will see mother and she will take care of us.”* *“Mother?”* The first baby guffawed. *“You believe in mother? Where is she now?”* The second baby calmly and patiently tried to explain. *“She is all around us. It is in her that we live. Without her there would not be this world.”* *“Ha. I don’t see her, so it’s only logical that she doesn’t exist.”* To which the other replied, *“Sometimes when you’re in silence you can hear her, you can perceive her. I believe there is a reality after delivery and we are here to prepare ourselves for that reality when it comes....”*

The beautiful parable is illuminating for a number of reasons. All that the spies reported to Moshe about the challenges facing them in the land of Israel was true. The settling of the land of Israel would be challenging. It was unwallled. There were giants. The challenges were numerous.

While these perceptions were technically correct, like the baby who does not understand how life after the womb can exist, the spies failed to realize their flawed approach. Relying on what they had perceived, they drew an assumption that the people of Israel would be unable to overcome these obstacles and inhabit the land of Israel. They forgot that God was with them and that there would be a chance to create a new reality and vision, one that would allow them to simultaneously exist independently of the limitations of the desert and their reliance on God. Like the baby who can only relate to the immediate reality that they are living in, the people of Israel failed to understand that their perception was only one side of the equation.

And so, the message from Parsha this week is two-fold. As Jewish people we retain our Emunah and faith that God provides for us, in all ways. We believe in a just and benevolent God. But we also are reminded that our perceptions can sometimes be flawed. While our perception of reality may seem foolproof, we are limited by our human constraints that do not allow us to always see the full picture and the ways of God. Thus, we must push past our shallow understanding and acknowledge God’s Divine plans for our lives with the belief that we are in safe hands that can and will provide for each one of us in abundance.



Nomi Kaltmann lives in Melbourne, Australia and comes to Maharat after earning her Bachelor of Laws and Bachelor of Liberal Arts in Politics and Jewish Civilizations from Monash University. In 2019, Nomi became the first Australian woman to enroll in the Yeshivat Maharat four-year Semikha program. She also holds a Masters degree in Legal Practice from the Australian National University. Nomi has worked for the Shadow Attorney General of Australia and as an advisor to the former Minister for Small Business in the Victorian Legislative Assembly. Specialising in charities and not-for-profit law, Nomi has worked for the Australian Charities Commission. In 2020 Nomi was selected to intern at Tablet Magazine and for a fellowship at Hillel International’s Centre for

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