



Shelah 5776: The Spirit of Things

“Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It’s not.”

— Dr Seuss

Perashat Shelah haunts us. On the surface, it doesn't seem to be a tale that would reverberate through millennia as the source of loss and pain. But this is precisely how it is seen by our Hakhamim.

‘And the entire community lifted up and let out their voice and the people cried on that night’. (14:1)

Said Ribbi Yohanan in the name of Rabba: That day was the 9th of Ab. G-d responded [to their crying] and said: ‘You cry without cause, I will set a cause for crying [on this day] for the generations...’¹

Twelve spies, one from each tribe, were sent by Moshe to spy out the land of Canaan before the nation entered to conquer it. They were thus set to be the only bearers of first-hand information about the land which placed an enormous amount of power and control in their hands. Upon their return from the mission they used that power to turn the hearts of the people away from moving forward and building a new and free nation; instead reporting that any attempt to conquer the land was not only futile, but suicide.

‘It is a land that eats its inhabitants! We saw giants there! We were like insects in their eyes...’ (13:32-33)

This triggered mass panic and mourning² causing the resolve to cross over the River Jordan and embrace the destiny that awaited them for over four centuries to collapse in a matter of minutes. The idea of freedom and sovereignty was too frightening for them to behold.

What made these men use their power to scare off the people from claiming their freedom? Were these not the very people who, as slaves, hoped for freedom? Had they not left Egypt with the dream of being the masters of their own lives? How could such noble ideals crumble so quickly?

Freedom and sovereignty, be they for a nation or for oneself, are among the most difficult of human achievements. The thought of these ideals was beautiful but the reality of what it would mean to achieve it would require a great amount of effort, sacrifice and perseverance.

Existing in all of us are the old and well-honed primal drives for security and minimal exertion. But these drives are almost always at odds with our divine inspiration for freedom and independence. When we are not alert and do not care enough to fight these instincts they always overcome us. We are particularly vulnerable to their influence when we are feeling fearful or insecure about our self-worth and well-being. The spies selected by Moshe were accomplished men of stature but

¹ Sotah, 35a

² 14:1-4



they collapsed when the prospect of genuine independence and spiritual growth was in their grasp. Fear and obstinate forces won the day.

At these vulnerable moments if we do not muster the strength of our souls that are the breath of G-d within us³ in order to build ourselves we will find reasons as to why we cannot. We will try and justify why we can't be bothered to properly educate ourselves, do what is necessary to heal, eat what is healthy, live where we thrive, and befriend those who nurture our growth. All of those acts, and many like them, take conviction, discipline, perseverance and consistency. For most of us it is a struggle that we know all too well. At times we win the battle and at times we lose, but what sets people of virtue apart from others is that they make the sacred their standard and commit to fighting for it; they dedicate their lives to spiritually nurturing themselves and others.

There are those among us, however, who have given up the struggle completely and succumb to the wretchedness of lassitude and apathy. They not only withdraw from the exertion of self-development they also thwart the attempts in others to grow so that they might not behold their own stagnation and lethargy in the light of others.

When the spies gave their false account of the land they succumbed to their own weariness. Theirs was not simply a moment of weakness, it was a premeditated act carefully orchestrated to dismantle the Exodus and its ends of freedom.

And G-d said to Moshe and Aharon: 'How long will I bear this wicked congregation?'

We all run the risk of giving up this battle. The struggle is real and it can only be won by recognising the divine aspect of our being, the spirit of G-d within us, and by committing to care for and nurture it at all costs. It is this spirit that the spies denied and that Caleb and Yehoshua protected.

G-d said: 'I live! And [My] Glory fills the earth!...indeed all those men have seen my Glory and [yet] have tested me these ten times. But as for my servant Caleb...there was another spirit in him.... (14:20-24)

We live with a continual tension that purifies souls in its difficulty. It is the battle of life and its great warriors bear the Glory of the Creator within them. With the knowledge and belief of it, they are carried and guided through the flames of battle without fear. Those souls know that it is not political or temporal power that matters but rather the power of G-d that runs through us.

³ Gen., 2:7



Parasha Perspectives

IV Shelach-Lecha

- 53 Story of the 'Spies' (13:1-14:10)
The mission (13:1-24); The bad report (13:25-33)
Panic, crying and rebellion (14:1-10)
- 54 Moshe successfully pleads for the People (14:11-25)
- 55 Consequences of the 'spies' (14:26-45)
Punishment for the People: forty years in the *midbar* (14:26-35)
Punishment for ten bad spies: died of plague (14:36-38)
Defying Moshe, some of the People try to invade the Land and fail (14:39-45)
- 56 Certain offerings must be accompanied by a *mincha* and *nesekh*, wine libation (15:1-16)
- 57a *Challah* (15:17-21)
- 57b Offerings for community sins (15:22-26)
- 57c Laws for individuals who sin unintentionally or intentionally (15:27-31)
- 58a Concerning a man who gathered wood on Shabbat (15:32-34)
- 58b He is stoned by word of God (15:35-36)
- 59 Law and significance of *tzitzit* (15:37-41)