

Parashat Shelach Lecha, 5772, 2012:

The Greatness of Jewish Women

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, my sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, and Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Yehonatan Binyamin Halevy ben Golda Friedel, and Moshe Reuven ben Chaya.

In the beginning of our *parasha*, we encounter 12 mighty and prestigious leaders of the Jewish people:

These are their names: For the tribe of Reuben, Shammua the son of Zakkur. For the tribe of Simeon, Shaphat the son of Hori. For the tribe of Judah, Caleb the son of Jepphuneh. For the tribe of Issachar, Yigal the son of Joseph. For the tribe of Ephraim, Hoshea the son of Nun. For the tribe of Benjamin, Palti the son of Raphu. For the tribe of Zebulun, Gaddiel the son of Sodi. For the tribe of Joseph, the tribe of Manasseh, Gaddi the son of Susi. For the tribe of Dan, Ammiel the son of Gemalli. For the tribe of Asher, Sethur the son of Michael. For the tribe of Naphtali, Nahbi the son of Vophsi. For the tribe of Gad, Geuel the son of Machi. (*Sefer Bamidbar* 13:4-15, translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

These great tribal princes are called “*anashim*” (“men”) which, as Rashi (1040-1105) notes in his commentary based on *Midrash Tanchuma* to *Sefer Bamidbar* 13:3, was an honorific appellation: “Every instance of the term *anashim* that appears in the text of the Torah is a term of distinction [literally, importance]. At that time they were righteous.” (Translation my own) These men were unquestionably the great leaders of the *Dor Hamidbar* (the Generation of the Desert). Their task in reference to the Land of Israel, was defined as one of exploring, searching, examining, and discovery. Therefore, in 13:2, 13: 21, and 13:25, we find the expressions “*v’yaturu*,” “*vayaturu*,” and “*meture*” respectively. So, too, do we find the infinitive form of this verb “*latur*” (to seek out or to discover) in verse 13:16.

Somehow, something went terribly wrong. Somehow, these great leaders, with the exception of Caleb and Hoshea (Joshua), ceased to be *anashim* and morphed into something quite different: *meraglim* (spies). This transformation is clearly represented in the first chapter of *Sefer Devarim* 20-24:

And I [Moses] said to you, “You have come to the mountain of the Amorites, which the L-d, our G-d, is giving us. Behold, the L-d, your G-d, has set the land before you; go up and possess it, as the L-d, G-d of your fathers has spoken to you; you shall neither fear nor be dismayed.” And all of you approached me and said, “Let us send men ahead of us so that they will search out the land for us and bring us back word by which route we shall go up, and to which cities we shall come.”

And the matter pleased me [Moses]; so I took twelve men from you, one man for each tribe. And they turned and went up to the mountain, and they came to the valley of Eshkol **and spied it out**. (Translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, emphasis my own).

The *Meraglim* failed to keep the proper perspective. They squandered the greatest opportunity in human history. Instead of fulfilling their mission, the Torah explicitly states that the men spied out the land (*v'yiraglu otah*), rather than exploring or discovering it. If they had lived up to their potential, Moshe would have led our forefathers into *Eretz Yisrael*, he would have been the *Mashiach* (Messiah), the permanent *Beit Hamikdash* (Holy Temple) would have been built, and the storied history of our people replete with its trials and tribulations would never have come to pass. We would have lived in the times of the *Mashiach*, instead of waiting for him for millennia.

What transformed these great and noble men, these universally recognized leaders, into mere “spies?” My rebbi and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), suggested that their grievous error and subsequent downfall resulted from their radical misconception and consequent misperception of the nature of the Land of Israel. This is best viewed in contrast to the manner in which Moshe perceived *Eretz Yisrael*:

Moses regarded the land not only in a political or physical light, but also as an exalted everlasting union. A singular *segulah* people, special to G-d, was being joined to a singular land, from which G-d's attention is never withdrawn. Destinies were being joined...

Moses expected the scouts to note the *segulah* singularity of the land, to perceive its worthiness in terms of Abraham's covenant with G-d.

Rabbi Soloveitchik noted that the *Meraglim* acted in total contradistinction to Moshe's perception of Eretz Yisrael:

They explored the area from the desert of Zin to Rehob, leading to Hamath, but they viewed the land as one would appraise property. Their report was that of spies, not that of scouts; they balanced debits against credits and declared the entire enterprise hopeless. With grandeur looking down on them, all they could see was the mundane. (*Reflections of the Rav*, Vol. I, pages 122-123)

The *Meraglim* had the opportunity and obligation to recognize the singular nature of the Promised Land, and to view it as an everlasting covenant between Hashem and our people. Tragically, however, they perceived it in purely naturalistic and militaristic terms. Thus they failed in their ultimate mandate - to recognize the *kedushah* (holiness) and G-d given nature of *Eretz Yisrael*.

Let us now, however, revisit the very beginning of our *parasha*, when Hashem first acceded to Moshe's request to send men to examine every aspect of *Eretz Yisrael*. The first and second verses of our Torah reading, state the following:

The L-rd spoke to Moses saying, "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."

Rashi immediately notes that Hashem had no interest in sending these men to *Eretz Yisrael*. Instead, he allowed Moshe to do so:

Send for yourself According to your own understanding. I am not commanding you, but if you wish, you may send. Since the Israelites had come [to Moses] and said, "Let us send men ahead of us," as it says, "All of you approached me..." (Deut. 1:22) [*Midrash Tanchuma* 5] (Translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, emphasis my own)

In “the best of all worlds,” Hashem would have wanted the Jewish people to have had the depth of faith-commitment whereby they simply would have believed that just as Hashem had taken them out from Egypt with wonders and miracles, and on the “wings of eagles” (*Sefer Shemot* 19:4), so too would He bring them to *Eretz Yisrael*. This notion is clearly expressed in *Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah* 17:7:

What does the Torah mean when it states: “Send for yourself men?” This means it was the Jewish people who wanted this. At the very moment wherein they were about to inherit the land, Hashem said to them: “Behold, the L-rd, your G-d, has set the land before you; go up and possess it, as the L-rd, G-d of your fathers has spoken to you; you shall neither fear nor be dismayed.” [*Sefer Devarim* 1:21] At that moment, all of the Jewish people surrounded Moshe: “And all of you approached me and said, ‘Let us send men ahead of us so that they will search out the land for us...’ **This proves they did not believe in Him** (*elah shelo he’eminu*) (Translation and emphasis my own)

There is, however, a further textual nuance and subtlety of language that needs to be examined in the phrase “Send for yourself men.” We have clearly seen that the *Midrash* saw the act of sending the princes as nothing other than a manifestation of the people’s *chisaron emunah* (lack of faith). Sending these men eventuated in a disaster of untold proportion, and one that echoes throughout the annals of history until our own moment in time. Who should have been sent instead? Whose exploration of the Land would not have been seen as a *chisaron emunah*? The answer is deceptively simple: Moshe should have sent women!

While this may sound like a radical feminist thought that is a by-product of our modern politically correct era, nothing could be further than the truth. The origin of this idea is found in the famous 16th century Torah commentary of Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim of Luntchitz (1550-1619) that is known as the *Kli Yakar*:

Another explanation as to why the Torah specifies “*anashim*” (“men”): Our Sages of blessed memory [in *Midrash Yalkut Shimoni, Parashat Pinchas*] noted that the men despised the Land and stated: “‘Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt’ (*Sefer Bamidbar* 14:4). [In contrast,] the women loved the Land and said: ‘Give us a permanent portion’ (ibid. 27:4). Therefore, the Holy One Blessed Be He said: ‘According to My opinion, since I see what the future will bring, **it is far better to send women** that love the land for they will not speak about it in a disparaging and negative manner. But you, [Moshe], believe that these men are in fact fine and upstanding individuals (*kesharim*), and you believe that the Land is beloved to them – Go ahead and send men!’” This is why when the Torah writes: “Send for yourself men,” [Rashi] interprets it as “According to your own understanding,” **as for Me [i.e. G-d], however, it would have been far better to send women** as has been stated. (Translation and emphasis my own)

This amazing statement of Rav Luntchitz speaks volumes about the essential holiness and unique character of the Jewish woman. Remember, it was the Jewish women who refused to give up hope and, amid the misery and backbreaking labor of Egypt, encouraged their husbands in *kedushah* and *taharah* (purity) to bring another generation of Jews into the world. In addition, it was the Jewish women who steadfastly refused to participate in the *Egel Hazahav* (the incident of the Golden Calf). Little wonder, then, that it would have been the Jewish women who would have set the stage for our grand entrance into *Eretz Yisrael*, with Moshe as *Mashiach* - if they had only been given the chance!

Shabbat Shalom

Past drashot may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email rdb718@gmail.com.

My audio *shiurim* on *Tefilah and Haskafah* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/7sp5vt3>

*** I have recently posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here:

<http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

**Follow new postings on my Twitter accounts: @theRavZatzal and @Torahtech613.