

Drash on Parshat Shelach-l'cha (Numbers 13:1–15:41)

Parshat Shelach-l'cha begins with the story of the **12 scouts** sent by Moses to check out the land of Canaan. (As we shall see, there is reason to call them “scouts,” rather than “spies.”) It tells of the disastrous results of that mission, then continues with miscellaneous sacrificial offerings and the disturbing tale of a man caught collecting wood on Shabbat. Then it concludes with the third paragraph of the Sh'ma – the commandment about tzitzit. The haftarah fast forwards us 38 years and relates the story of the **2 spies** sent by Joshua to reconnoiter Jericho prior to the invasion and conquest of the Holy Land. I'd like to collect multiple commentaries (in Etz Hayim and by Rabbis Lisa Gelber, Shlomo Riskin and Ismar Schorsch, among others) to try to tie some of these together.

The mission of the scouts seems predestined to fail. God says to Moses, “Shelach l'cha ...” (“Send for yourself ...”). Why not the simple command, “Shelach ...” (“Send ...”)? There is no need to send scouts/spies to investigate the land. After all, hasn't God already promised the land to the Children of Israel? So it seems that the desire to check things out comes not from God, but rather from Moses – following his own desires or prodded to do so by the people. In resignation, God says, in effect, “OK, you want to check things out? Fine, send scouts for yourself, but not for me.” The scouts are sent “v'ya-tu-ru et eretz Canaan” – (“to scout out/look around the land of Canaan”). The verb here comes from a root meaning “to scout, seek out, look around” – in modern Hebrew it means to tour like a tourist.

So Moses charges the men to scout out the land and report on the people (strong or weak, few or many) and their towns (open or fortified), the soil (rich or poor) and its produce. It is important to note that he doesn't charge them to come back with a recommendation about invading the land.

Off they go, spatziering around the land for 40 days (13:25), schlepping back some pomegranates and grapes, and reporting that it is indeed a goodly land, but that the people are powerful and the cities are fortified. This sets the B'nei Yisrael to murmuring in fear, but Caleb (one of the scouts) tries to hush them, “... surely we shall overcome [the country] (13:30).” Ten of the other scouts (all except Joshua), now chime in (13:31-33) that “they are stronger than we are,” “the land devours its settlers,” “the people are giants,” and most tellingly, “We looked like grasshoppers to ourselves and so we must have looked to them [the inhabitants of the land].” Note the subtlety here. The text doesn't assert that the 12 looked like grasshoppers to the inhabitants of the land. It is silent about what the inhabitants think. Unfortunately, it is universally true that if we have low opinions of ourselves, we also believe that others have low opinions of us.

The people hear this and panic, and are not reassured by Joshua's exhortation, “The land is exceedingly good, flowing with milk and honey, and if the Lord is pleased with us, He will ... give it to us. ... The Lord is with

us. Have no fear of them [the inhabitants] (14:7-9).” The people threaten to stone Moses, Aaron, Caleb, and Joshua. This, after the Golden Calf, is their second great sin of disbelief. God is ready to destroy the Children of Israel and to “make of [Moses] a nation far more numerous than they.” Moses pleads for the people (14:19), concluding, “S’lach nah la-a-von ha-am hazeh k’go-del chas-deh-cha ...” (“Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people, according to your great kindness ...”). The text continues (14:20), “Va-yo-mer Adonai, ‘Sah-lach-ti k’d’vah-reh-cha’ ” (“And the Lord said, ‘I have pardoned as you have asked.’”). The plea and response have become a familiar part of the Yom Kippur liturgy.

Of course, the pardon is far from complete. The people are doomed to wander the wilderness for 40 years (one year for each day of the scouts’ mission), until all of those who were over 20 at the time of the Exodus – excepting only Caleb and Joshua – have died out. The 10 faithless scouts perish immediately in a plague.

Contrast this with the haftarah , where the two spies (“meraglim” – from a root meaning to spy) are sent “cheresh” – secretly – to look over the land and Jericho. No mere “tourists” here! The king of Jericho immediately learns that they have come “lachpor et haaretz” (to spy out the whole country), and they are hidden by Rachav, who deflects the king’s men from them. While the spies wait until the coast is clear, Rachav tells them that the people of Jericho have heard all about the prowess of the Children of Israel, and she knows that God will give the land to them. She extracts from them a promise to save her and her family when Jericho is attacked. (As an aside, the root “רחב resh-het-bet” in the hiphil stem means “to enlarge territory (Ex. 34:24),” “make wide room for (2 Sam. 22:37),” “give confidence to (Ps. 119:32),” and there is a midrash that says Rachav later becomes the wife of Joshua!)

The spies sneak out her window, head for the hills, hide for three days to avoid their pursuers, return to Joshua and report, “The Lord has delivered the whole land into our power; in fact, all the inhabitants of the land are quaking before us.” What a difference 38 years make! No self-perceived grasshoppers here!

Now back to the tzitzit. In verse 15.39, we are commanded to look at the tzitzit and recall the commandments* “and observe them, **so that you do not follow your heart and eyes** in your lustful urges.” And what is the verb translated as “follow”? “Ta-tu-ru,” from the same root as the scouts’ “v’ya-tu-ru.” We should go through life with intention and faith – purposefully and not as wanderers or tourists – for the former path, as shown by the nameless spies in the haftarah, leads to fulfillment.

*Reinforced by some gematria – Rashi says that the numerical value of tzitzit, ציצית, is 600, plus five knots, plus 8 strands, equals 613, the traditional number of commandments in the Torah! However Rashi’s math is faulty: צ = 90, י = 10, ת = 400, so ציצית = 90 + 10 + 90 + 400 = 590. Hizkuni comes to Rashi’s rescue. ציצת appears 3 times in the third paragraph of the Sh’ma, the 3rd time as לציצת and ל = 30, bringing the average up to 600.