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*D'var Torah*

## **SHELACH**

God gave the land of Canaan to the Israelites. There was one problem however: the land was already inhabited. So, at the request of God, twelve scouts were sent on a reconnaissance mission. Ten of those scouts reported back that the inhabitants are mighty and that the cities are huge and fortified. Upon hearing this report, the Israelites became very fearful and refused to go to Canaan. Even though the land was to be a gift from God, they did not trust God to assure their victory over the local people. They were subsequently punished by God for this lack of trust.

There are really two stories here, the one that was told and the one that was not. We read the story from the Israelites' point of view. What about the story from the point of view of the inhabitants of Canaan?

The plan was for them to lose their land to the Israelites even though they had done nothing wrong. If a people conquer another people's land, we call them invaders or colonialists - words that certainly do not have a positive connotation. So, maybe the Israelites were morally right to refuse to invade the land of Canaan, potentially killing innocent people. Granted, if they were right, it was for the wrong reasons, not out of virtuous morality but out of fear of losing their own lives.

Let's take the idea of God's request to take over the land of Canaan one step further. God became angry and punished the Israelites because they did not trust that God would assure their victory over the local inhabitants. **But**, what happens if a people try to take over inhabited land, claiming that they are doing it in the name of God? Do we accept or do we dismiss that claim? Unless we are willing to accept that a specific religion is the **only** path to God, how do we know when the claim "In The Name Of God" is real or not? Individuals claiming that they are acting "In The Name Of God" have led armies to war and sowed utmost misery. Examples of such wars abound throughout history, from Christian Crusades in the Middle Ages to Islamic Jihad today.

Does this then mean that God's gift of inhabited land to the Israelites was irresponsible and setting a bad precedent? Let me give a very Jewish answer. Maybe yes, maybe no. On the one hand, God could have given uninhabited land. Such a gift would have ensured that nobody lost. On the other hand, a careful reading of the text shows that nowhere is it written that God asked the Israelites to wage war in order to receive the gift of the land. So, instead of seeing war as the only solution, why didn't they try to negotiate a deal with the local people? After all, a small colony of Israelites had occupied that territory a few hundred years back during the time of the patriarchs. They could have used that fact as an argument that there was some historical justification for settling the land. It would have been a tough sell to make but, since the Israelites had God on their side, it might have worked. As we would say in today's world, the Israelites needed to think out of the box. It is this message that I want to take away with me: to be cognizant of the harm we might be inflicting on other people through our actions and to make use of our imagination to discover alternative approaches.

One final and personal note. I have to confess that I have always had problems being told what religious beliefs I should hold or not hold. I joined the adult Bnai Mitzvah class not out of religious conviction but rather out of a desire to go through the Bar Mitzvah process to educate myself about Judaism and see what has meaning for me. When I first read this passage, I saw a very irresponsible gift from God. After reading it again and again, my take on it changed from an indictment of God (how can God ask the Israelites to kill those poor people of Canaan?) to a realization of the blind sidedness of the Israelites (why didn't they think of non-violent ways of receiving God's gift?). Even though I have not become 'religious', I have come to better appreciate the interpretation possibilities offered by the Torah. Now that I've had a taste, I look forward to more.