

Sasha Malamud

D'var Torah

SHELACH

The Torah portion of *Shelach* (The Sending of Spies) is the one dearest to me. The account of the sending and return of the spies was the first passage from the Torah that I managed to read in Hebrew. I started from reading commentaries on Chabad Lubavitch web site, then I wanted to read a translation of the actual text, and then I wondered if I could read the original Holy text in Hebrew. I remembered that I had a book of Torah with Russian translation very close to the original text; and on Shabbat *Shelach* a year ago I sat down to read the weekly Torah portion. It took one hour and a half, and in the end I found myself in tears, for the Hebrew text was somehow more emotionally charged than English or Russian translation, and I felt so much empathy with all the characters. I could feel the despair of the people whose leaders told them that there was no hope any more. I could feel like Moses and Aaron who lost their ability for leadership and fell on their faces before the raging crowd. I could feel like Joshua and Caleb tearing their cloths and screaming in righteous indignation, "We can do it! Let's do the right thing!" with no one listening. Even like *Shechina*, the Divine Presence, outraged at one more failure of her chosen people and ready to abandon the whole project. But most of all, I felt like the leaders of the ten tribes who brought what commentaries call "the evil report".

As the late Lubavicher Rebbe Menachem M. Schneerson points out, the ten scouts were the most prominent people of their generation, appointed by Moses and inspired by G-d to lead their tribes. Is it possible that they were mere cowards afraid of fighting? They must have had higher reasons for their reluctance to enter the land. In the desert, the life of Israelites went on a high spiritual level. They were provided from above for all their needs, protected from all dangers and enjoyed constant Presence of the Divine inside their encampment. Upon entering the Land, they would have to plant and harvest, tend their cattle, trade, fight, perform all the mundane tasks. Is it possible in such circumstances to keep a close connection to G-d? Why can't we just stay in the desert, and shine "the light unto the nations" from there? Live in this kind of ashram, a big meditation center, devoted to prayers and greater connection to G-d, where all can come and learn to do the same?

Sorry, but it does not work this way. If this were possible, Adam and Eve would be still living in *Gan Eden*, the Garden of Eden, in harmony with all creation. Instead, they were sent out to populate the earth. G-d desires his dwelling in the lowly realms. He needs us in order to make *Holy* an adjective for *Land*. We, people, are in a different situation than all other creatures. We are not like angels who live in heaven, nor are we like animals that live on earth. We can stay on earth and touch heaven at the same time. We are empowered to sanctify everything we touch and go through. However, in order to do so we have to engage in material tasks.

In this, I find a very personal message. I myself tend to give more significance to prayer, exercise, and meditation, than to practical matters, and think more about world problems than well-being of my loved ones. This determined my choice of mitzvot that I undertook for my bat-mitzvah: to spend more time tidying my apartment, cooking for my family, and making phone calls to my relatives as an ethical mitzvah (let them decide if I succeeded in this), and a charity box as a ritual one.

But let us go a step further. The task given to Israelites upon entering the Land was not only to work, and trade, and defend their homes, but also to conquer and possibly exterminate the seven nations living there. Perhaps, I am projecting my post-Holocaust vision here, but isn't it possible that the enlightened leaders of Israelite tribes were especially reluctant to destroy other nations for the sake of G-d because they had premonition of the time when other nations would want to destroy us in G-d's name? What might have happened if the ten spies were conscious of their true motives and instead of rallying their people turned to G-d and said, "We will not kill other people in Your name. It is against the commandments You gave us!"

Remember what had happened after the sin of Golden Calf. G-d suggested to Moses that He would destroy Israelites and produce another nation from Moses. Moses adamantly refused to accept that. The result was something that did not exist before: the gift of Yom Kippur, of repentance and forgiveness, a completely new mechanism to resolve controversy between G-d and man.

We say so often that being Israel means to confront G-d that it almost became commonplace. But what if the ten leaders stood up in this case? The result might have been something that we cannot imagine yet, and are still waiting for -- a Divinely ordained mechanism for resolution of religious conflicts between nations. Something we are probably not going to see until the time of Moshiah. As Orthodox people say, "May he come speedily in our days!"

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