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Parshat Shlach

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PIECE OF CAKE

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

It was not a good scenario. The twelve spies returned from their forty-day sojourn to the Land of Canaan and ten of them were not happy campers.

They left as an enthusiastic and united crew, selected by Moshe for what should have been an easy mission of assurance — confirming what they were already told by their forebears, as well as the Almighty — Eretz Yisrael is a beautiful land that flows with milk and honey. Instead, the only two who had anything positive to say about the land of Israel, were Calev and Yehoshua. The rest of the spies claimed that the land was not good and that there were dangerous giants living there who would crush them. And now, in the face of the derogatory, inflammatory and frightening remarks that disparaged the Promised Land, Calev and Yehoshua were left to defend it.

It was too late. The ten evil spies had stirred up the negative passions of a disheartened nation. The people wanted to return to Egypt. But the two righteous men, Yehoshua and Calev, tried to persuade them otherwise.

The first and most difficult task facing them was to get the Children of Israel to listen to them. The Torah tells us: “They spoke to the entire assembly of the Children of Israel, saying, “The Land that we passed through, to spy it out — the Land is very, very good.

If Hashem desires us, He will bring us to this Land and give it to us, a Land that flows with milk and honey. But do not rebel against Hashem! You should not fear the people of the Land, for they are our bread. Their protection has departed from them; Hashem is with us. Do not fear them!” (Numbers 14:7-9).

What did they mean by saying that the giants were “our bread”? Did they mean that the children of Israel will eat them like bread? Why bread of all things?

Yankel, a Jewish immigrant from the Ukraine made his livelihood selling rolls on a corner in lower Manhattan. He was not an educated man. With poor eyesight and a hearing problem, he never read a newspaper or listened to the radio. He would daven, say Tehillim, learn a bit of Chumash, and bake his rolls. Then he would stand on the side of the road and sell his fresh-baked delicious smelling rolls. “Buy a roll, mister?” he would ask passersby, the majority of them would gladly oblige with a generous purchase. Despite his simple approach, Yankel did well. He ordered a larger oven and increased his flour and yeast orders. He brought his son home from college to help him out. Then something happened. His son asked him, “Pa, haven’t you heard about the situation with the world markets? There are going to be great problems soon. We are in the midst of a depression!” The father figured that his son’s economic forecast was surely right. After all, his son went to college whereas he himself did not even read the papers. He canceled the order for the new oven and held s for more flour, took down his signs and waited. Sure enough with no advertisement and no inventory, his sales fell overnight. And soon enough Yankel said to his son. “You are right. We are in the middle of a great depression.”

Bread is the staple of life, but it also is the parable of faith. Our attitude toward our bread represents our attitude toward every challenge of faith. If one lives life with emunah p’shutah, simple faith, then his bread will be sufficient to sustain him. The customers will come and he will enjoy success. It is when we aggrandize the bleakness of the situation through the eyes of the economic forecasters, the political pundits, or the nay sayers who believe in the power of their predictions and give up hope based on their mortal weaknesses, then one might as well close shop.

Yehosua and Calev told the people that these giants are no more of a challenge than the demands of our daily fare. They are our bread. And as with our daily fare, our situation is dependent totally on our faith.

If we listen to the predictions of the forecasters and spies, we lose faith in the Almighty and place our faith in the powerless. However, by realizing that the seemingly greatest challenges are the same challenges of our daily fare — our bread — the defeat of even the largest giants will be a piece of cake.

Parshat Shlach, Iran and Moral Clarity in Times of War

Rabbi Dr. Kenneth Brander

As Israel engages in crucial defensive actions against Iran and bears the burden of safeguarding its citizens and future, the timeless lessons of this week's parsha feel especially relevant.

Parshat Shlach and its Haftarah in Sefer Yehoshua both recount missions of “spies” sent into the Land of Israel. But a closer reading reveals striking contrasts—in purpose, execution, and outcome—that offer enduring lessons on leadership, truth, and the moral demands of power – especially during times of war.

In Parshat Shlach, Moshe sends twelve men, *kulam anashim roshei b'nei Yisrael heima*—“all distinguished leaders of the Children of Israel” (Bamidbar 13:3). These were not undercover agents, but public figures, tasked not with espionage but with spiritual ambassadorship. Their mission, as framed by Moshe, was not military, but inspirational: to affirm the land's bounty and excite the people for their divine inheritance. In fact, the Torah doesn't call them *meraglim*—spies—but rather *tayarim*, those who “explore” or “scout” (*latur et ha'aretz*). Their goal was to inspire, to elevate national faith, not to assess military risk.

Yet despite reporting the truth about what they saw—the land's fertility and the presence of formidable inhabitants—their mission failed. Why? Because they misunderstood their purpose. Though factually accurate, their words injected fear instead of faith, and in doing so, they sowed doubt in the hearts of the nation. Their truth lacked vision; their facts lacked trust in God's promise.

Contrast this with the Haftarah from Sefer Yehoshua. Here, Yehoshua sends two anonymous spies – much like the recently revealed clandestine missions Israel was compelled to undertake against Iran – explicitly to *leragel*—to gather intelligence (Yehoshua 2:1). This is classic espionage: secretive, strategic, and purposeful. They are not known. Their goal is to prepare for battle, not to inspire the people.

And yet, Yehoshua's spies' clandestine mission produces an extraordinary moral moment. In the heart of enemy territory, they encounter Rachav, a Canaanite woman of ill repute, who not only protects them but declares her faith in the God of Israel. She is spared—and later, according to the Rabbis (Bavli Megillah 14b), becomes a righteous convert, counted among the ancestors of prophets.

Why does the Tanach preserve this story of Rachav for us? Because it teaches us that even in war – especially in war – the Jewish people are held to a higher moral standard. The Rambam (Hilchot Melachim 6:1) famously rules that even when waging a *milchemet mitzva*, an obligatory war, the Jewish people must first seek peace. War, even when justified, must be guided by ethical clarity. The saving of Rachav is not a tactical footnote; it is a moral headline.

This message could not be more relevant today. For years, Israel has warned the world that Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons threatens not only Israel, but the entire free world. The Torah demands that we uphold justice and compassion, but when we are left with no choice, we bear responsibility to protect our people and the values of a free society. Unlike Iran, whose attacks deliberately target our civilians, Israel focuses solely on military objectives – even at great risk to our pilots and soldiers. Like Yehoshua's spies, who recognized and honored Rachav's humanity, we too must continue, despite the extreme difficulty, to uphold our moral compass, even when our enemies exploit that very morality. This is not a weakness; it is our greatest strength! It is the embodiment of *Tzelem Elokim*, the divine image in every person.

May we be blessed with leaders – military, political and spiritual – who possess both the strategic clarity of Yehoshua's spies and the humility and moral vision that Moshe's emissaries lacked. And may we always remember that the land we strive to protect is not merely territory—but a living testimony to the principles and values we uphold.

When Jews Rise Like Lions

By Rabbi Dovid Margolin

As I write, miracles are unfolding before our eyes. The threat of an imminent nuclear attack has been foiled. The Israel Air Force dominates the skies of Iran. The massive retaliation expected has amounted instead to a few enemy missiles breaking through defenses. And while they have tragically and unforgivably taken innocent lives, it is clear to all that miracles abound.

Over the course of nearly half a century, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, of righteous memory, taught that as Jews we seek the guidance of Torah on all matters of life, from our day-to-day activities to matters of war and peace. The same Torah that commands us not to murder, underscores the vital importance of protecting the lives of the innocent, and guides us how and when to fight wars.

The Talmud teaches: “If someone comes to kill you, rise to kill him first.”

“Since we know that the ‘other’ has indeed ‘come to kill you,’” the Rebbe explained in 1969, elucidating the Torah’s principle in the context of Israel’s position in the Middle East, “the Torah commands us to ‘rise early to kill him.’ The instruction is clear: Do not wait until the other comes to annihilate you. That could, G-d forbid, already be too late. Rather one must ‘rise and kill him first.’”

True morality is not based on the whims of man, but the commandments of the just and merciful G-d. Just as murder contravenes G-d’s will and compassion for the lives He has made, so too, when lives can be saved by decisive, preemptive measures, we carry out the divine will to protect the lives of the innocent.

“And when the Jewish people go out with clear strength,” the Rebbe continued, “signaling to the enemy that we are not afraid of anyone—we are not afraid of the ‘chariots’ or of the ‘horses’ since ‘we [trust] in the name of the L-rd our G-d’—then ‘the fear of the Jewish people will fall upon them’” and ensure decisive victory.

The cabinet meeting that signed off on the preemptive strike upon Iran and its nuclear facilities was opened with a prayer and closed with the recitation of Psalms. Earlier that afternoon, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu approached the Kotel, the ancient Western Wall in Jerusalem, wearing a *tallit* with the biblically prescribed *tzitzit* tassels on the garment’s four corners. As Jews have done at the hallowed site for 2,000 years, he prayed. On his note of supplication, he invoked the verse “Behold a people that rises like a lioness and leaps up like a lion!,” asking for G-d’s help. (The verse, from Numbers, alludes also to the name of the bold military actions Israel would commence in a matter of hours, fighting that is still ongoing: Operation Rising Lion.)

That the country’s leadership turned to G-d in prayer before launching an attack on a large, well-armed and blood thirsty enemy was apropos, for in a battle pitting natural resources, strength and size alone, the Jewish people are at an obvious disadvantage. But our survival has never been a natural one. Rather, it is when we put our trust in G-d that we emerge victorious. In light of this reality, we recognize that as vital as planes, drones and secret operatives are for battle—we must create the material conditions for victory—it is our prayer, Torah study and performance of mitzvot that are our ultimate medium for divine blessing and supernatural success.

“Behold a people that rises like a lioness and leaps up like a lion.” What does this mean? Rashi explains:

When they arise from sleep in the morning, they overcome obstacles like a fearsome lion. And like a lion, they grab the opportunity to perform mitzvahs: to wear a *tallit*, to recite the Shema, and to put on *tefillin*.

The Rebbe points out that Rashi is clearly teaching us that this verse does not refer simply to the physical might and heroism of the Jewish people. Instead, it invokes the mitzvahs Jews race to do each morning as the true source of their strength: *tzitzit*, Shema and *tefillin*. In its instructions to us, the Torah connects each of these three mitzvahs to the foundational miracle of our nationhood, the Exodus from Egypt. “I am the L-rd your G-d, Who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” These three in particular evoke the Exodus in thought, speech and deed.

1. The *tzitzit* that Jewish men and boys wear serve as a constant reminder to think about the G-dly miracle of the Exodus.
2. In verbally reciting the *Shema* prayer daily, we recount the Exodus in our speech.
3. And when we put on *tefillin*, we signal with our actions—to ourselves and to others—that G-d delivered us from Egypt “with a mighty hand.”

So rises a Jewish lion. During the 1991 Persian Gulf War, the dictator of Iraq, a man whose name dominated headlines then and for decades and is today all but forgotten, fired 39 Scud missiles at Israel, and nothing happened. At the time the Rebbe called upon everyone “to give full attention” to the wondrous events that had unfolded. “These were *revealed miracles*, obvious miracles, not only for Jews but also for all nations, ‘seen in all the corners of the earth’; everyone saw the great miracles that unfolded at this time,” he wrote.

The war had reached its climax around the holiday of Purim, which marks the miraculous salvation of the Jewish people in ancient Persia during the times of Mordechai and Esther. That place is now known as Iran. As we continue to witness the unfolding of this unprecedented war, we must once again recognize the revealed miracles taking place, both in the execution of the strikes in Iran, and in the defense of the Land of Israel.

“Our Torah teaches and directs us to guard against speaking in terms of predicting evil,” the Rebbe wrote then. “We pray that henceforth there will be only good tidings, in the kind of good that is revealed and obvious.”

Having taken the Torah’s initiative to “rise and kill” the Jewish people’s enemies first, it is now in the hands of the People of Israel to rise like lions in the study of Torah and performance of *mitzvot*. For it is by increasing our efforts to elevate our daily conduct to the level of the supra-natural that we merit miraculous victories drawing from that same place outside the bonds of nature, preparing us and the world for fulfillment of the prophecy: “As in the days of your liberation from Egypt will I show you wonders.”

“For the tribe of Yehuda, Caleb the son of Yefuneh” (13:6)

Chizkuni points out that Calev’s father was actually named Chetzron, but Calev was called “son of Yefuneh” because he turned away from the advice of the spies. People earn names for themselves through their accomplishments. Just as Calev earned a special name for himself because of what he did, we should work on building up names and reputations through which we will be remembered.

“They spread an evil report about the land which they had scouted, telling the Children of Israel: The land we passed through to explore is a land that consumes its inhabitants and all the people we saw in it are men of stature” (13:32)

The spies saw people dying everywhere that they went and they decided that this was because the land consumes its inhabitants. However, as Rashi explains, Hashem did this as a kindness for them, distracting the locals whenever the spies were passing through so that they could scout the area unnoticed. They could have come to this conclusion on their own with a more positive outlook. The large fruits could have been viewed as a great blessing from Hashem which would enable them to have plenty of food and devote more time to Torah. The giants in the land could have been described as an opportunity to make a tremendous Kiddush Hashem by defeating them. But the spies had already decided to look at the land with a negative approach and made their own judgment based on that bias. Rashi notes that the Torah says “they went and they came,” indicating that they returned with the same mindset that they had cemented in their minds when they had left forty days earlier. Their report was negative because they had decided to adopt a negative attitude from the very beginning. It is always important to look at things positively. Had the spies adopted a more positive perspective on what they witnessed during their mission and attempted to see things in a good light, they would have recognized the good in all the strange things that they saw. In relationships too, words and actions can be interpreted in multiple ways. The Torah obligates us to give people the benefit of the doubt and assume that they mean well. People have a tendency to look at things negatively and ascribe bad intentions to others, but if we push ourselves to think positively, we will be able to see the good in others.

“Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them: When you arrive in the land of your dwelling place, which I am giving you” (15:2)

Why is the story of the spies followed by the mitzvah to pour wine on the mizbeiach alongside korbanos? The people were distraught after hearing that they would be wandering in the desert for the next forty years and they despaired of ever reaching Eretz Yisrael. By immediately teaching them a mitzvah that would only apply in Eretz Yisrael, Hashem was reassuring them that their children would eventually get there one day. He wanted them to know that He was still with them and looking after them at all times. Three times in the parsha, Hashem describes Eretz Canaan as “the land where I am bringing you,” reminding the people that Hashem was going to help them and that only through Him could they expect to conquer the land. Hashem’s response to the anguish of the nation teaches us the importance of giving strength to those who are down. We should also try to reassure and give comfort to those who are experience difficulties in their lives.

“This shall be fringes for you, and when you see it, you will remember all the commandments of Hashem to perform them, and you shall not wander after your hearts and after your eyes after which you are going astray” (15:39)

The Midrash Tanchuma says: Hashem gave us Torah in order to help us earn a beautiful Olam Haba. Wherever a Jew goes, Hashem connects him with a mitzvah so that he can earn his eternity. Our religion is not separated from our business pursuits or any other endeavor. Whatever we are doing is always governed by mitzvos. Working the field, building a house, engaging in commerce – whatever we may be doing, there are always mitzvos that guide our conduct and give us the opportunity to fulfill the will of Hashem. The Midrash adds the following parable: There was once a man drowning at sea. A boat came to rescue him and the sailor tossed a rope down into the water. He called out to the man sinking in the water that he must hold on to the rope if he wanted to have any hope of survival. This story is an allegory for our existence in this world. The physical desires and temptations around us are constantly weighing us down and threaten to sink us. Hashem gave us mitzvos so that we can hold on to them as a means of keeping ourselves afloat. Without them, there is no way that we can withstand the dangers to our souls. The Torah tells us that the strings of the tzitzis are meant to remind us of Hashem’s mitzvos and one way that they accomplish this function is because the strings are reminiscent of the rope in the allegory. They remind us that mitzvos are our lifeline in this world. The only way to preserve our spiritual health is by holding on tightly to them and taking advantage of every mitzvah opportunity.

By Rabbi Mayer Friedman

The Land's Blessing

by Shlomo Katz

Most of this week's parsha relates the story of the Spies that Bnei Yisrael sent to examine Eretz Yisrael and the tragic aftermath of that excursion. Afterwards, the Torah teaches the mitzvah of Challah / giving a kohen a portion of each dough that one kneads. The Torah says (15:19, 21): "It shall be that when you will eat of the bread of the Land, you shall set aside a portion for Hashem. . . From the first of your kneading you shall give a portion to Hashem, for your generations."

Why, asked R' Joseph B. Soloveitchik z"l is this mitzvah taught in this parashah? Why is it not mentioned in next week's parashah together with the other produce-related, Eretz Yisrael-dependent laws, such as Terumah?

R' Soloveitchik's answer is quoted as follows: The commandment to separate Challah is different from Mitzvot such as Terumah and Ma'aser in that the latter apply to the produce of Eretz Yisrael wherever the produce may be, while the former applies to a dough kneaded in Eretz Yisrael regardless of where the wheat grew. [Ed. note: By rabbinic decree, Challah is separated even in the Diaspora.] Terumah and Ma'aser are indicative of the intrinsic holiness of Eretz Yisrael and of the blessing attributable to the Land itself. Not so Challah. That mitzvah is a reminder of G-d's blessing that rests on the handiwork of the residents of Eretz Yisrael.

The mitzvah of Challah belongs specifically after the episode of the Spies, for their very doubt was whether Bnei Yisrael were strong enough to conquer and inhabit the Land. In the context of those doubts, the Torah teaches that the efforts of those who inhabit the Land are blessed.

We Were Like Grasshoppers in Our Eyes, and So Too in Their Eyes

By Rabbi David Wolkenfeld

Whenever I hear about Israeli intelligence operatives getting the best of their American counterparts, I'm reminded of the old story about the American president who is flummoxed by the stream of information that Israel seems to have that the CIA is missing. The director of the CIA explains, "Mr. President, the Jews have a place they go, called "shul" and that's where they share information." The president is intrigued and decides to go to "shul" to find out. "Here's how it works," the CIA director explains. "First, you sit down next to someone and say, 'Good Shabbos.' Then, you say, 'nu?' and that's the secret code. After you say that he'll share what he knows. The president is very excited. He goes to shul the very next Shabbat and sits himself down towards the back of the shul. He turns to the man next to him and says, "Good Shabbos." The man says "Good Shabbos" back to him. The president then says, "nu?" And the man leans close and whispers, "Shhh. The president is in shul today."

We do have a history, however, of espionage and we encountered two examples of spy missions this Shabbat. Moshe sends out spies, with disastrous results in the first half of Parashat Shelach, and in our haftara, Yehoshua sends out spies, as the first step of his successful conquest of Eretz Yisrael. These two episodes of Jewish espionage are linked by the choice of the story of Yehoshua's spies as the haftara for Parashat Shelach.

Yehoshua's spies can be read as a sort of commentary or reaction on Moshe's spies. And Moshe's spies can be seen as a background for Yehoshua's own initiative. When we read the stories this way, what do we discover? Moshe's spies were the least secret spies in world history. Do you remember Valerie Plame? She was a CIA agent whose identity was revealed by unknown members the Bush administration as retribution for her husband publishing an op-ed that had been critical of the president. Disclosing the name of an undercover agent was considered a major violation. In contrast the names of Moshe's spies were announced in public before their mission had even begun! What kind of espionage is that?! They were prominent people, tribal chieftains and heads of clans. That is no way to select people for a secret mission. It was not a secret mission whatsoever. Everyone knew about the mission when they left, everyone knew the identities of the spies, and when they returned they delivered their report - not to Moshe alone, but in front of the entire population.

What a predictable disaster! Indeed, the typical words in Biblical Hebrew, lahpor, or l'ragel that refer to spying are never used in connection to the so-called meraglim - Moshe's supposed spies. Yehoshua, by contrast, sends out his spies anonymously. There is no fanfare at their departure, they go and return without names. They give their report only to Yehoshua.

On the other hand, Moshe's spies conduct a 40 day survey of the length and breadth of Eretz Yisrael. They are fully successful in fulfilling their mission. They manage to see everything that they were asked to see, and to come back, without having been apprehended, and to present a full report.

Yehoshua's spies, however, are discovered right away. They go to Yericho, they meet Rachav, - an innkeeper of one kind or another- and she knows who they are right away. They return to Yehoshua without discovering any strategic information about the country they are about to enter.

So who were the better spies? Were Moshe's spies better? Did they get better information? They certainly got more information. For all of the secrecy and anonymity of Yehoshua's spies, they were caught right away and easily identified by Rachav. Were they failures as spies?

Those are the wrong questions to ask. The juxtaposition of these two stories points us in a different direction. Moshe sent spies as a prelude to the greatest disaster to befall the generation of the desert. Yehoshua sent spies as a prelude to the successful conquest of Eretz Yisrael. The different outcomes were not because of the relative quality of the espionage. Which spy mission got more information is irrelevant.

As the spies summarize their mission, they declare:

וַשָּׁם רָאִינוּ אֶת־הַנְּפִלִים בְּנֵי עֲנָק מְאֹד־הַנָּפְלִים וְנָהָי בְּעֵינֵינוּ כְּחַגְלִים וְכֵן הָיִינוּ בְּעֵינֵיהֶם:

And there we saw the Nephilim, the sons of Anak, who come of the Nephilim; and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight.'

The spies saw giants roaming the land. These people were so large that the spies felt like grasshoppers. So far, so good. And then they add, "And so too did we appear in their eyes." How could they know how they appeared in the eyes of the giants? This is a projection. The spies were so fearful that they projected their own sense of inadequacy onto the giants. That spirit doomed their mission. No amount of espionage, intelligence, or research could overcome such a great deficiency in confidence.

In contrast, the spies whom Yehoshua sent did not need to conduct a thorough exploration of Canaan once they had spoken to Rachav and seen how thoroughly afraid the Canaanites had become. They had learned all that they needed to learn from speaking to Rachav.

We cannot be so fearful of what confronts us, that we lose sight of our true strengths and communal assets. And we have real assets. The State of Israel, thank God, is strong and flourishing. It is an inspiring place to visit or a place to study. Jewish life is inspiring and offers community and a sense of belonging to modern people yearning for connections with others. Jewish life offers opportunities for meaning and transcendence to a generation yearning for those things. We need to invest in our strengths and to make use of our assets and we cannot do that if we panic in reaction to our challenges.

We have real threats. We face real challenges and confront dangerous opponents. But we must not panic. We have to confront our fears, face, them, but not project our fears onto our adversaries. Because we also have real strengths upon which to draw.

A number of years ago, in the days leading up to Parashat Shelach, a platoon of soldiers in Israel's Nachal combat unit, took part in an unusual training exercise. They recreated the path of meraglim, of Moshe's spies - but in reverse. They began their march in Yatir Forrest, just South of the Hevron Hills, and marched South to the Aravah towards Tel Arad. As they finished their march, approaching Kadesh Barnea, the place from which Moshe sent his ill-fated delegation 3500 years ago, these young soldiers, shouted out at the empty expanse in front of them - and shouted back towards history:

טובה הארץ מאד מאד!

This land is indeed a very, very good land!