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News

Parashat Shelach Lecha 5780

Rabbi Gershon Sillins – 10th June 2020

Our portion this week is Shelach Lecha – which means, “send for yourself,” a surprising start to the story, because it is so clearly not a commandment. It’s as if the text is saying, “if you don’t believe me, go look for yourself,” and Moses does so, sending a representative committee to get the lay of the land. Moses’s leadership had been put to the test more than once, and in the previous weekly portion, we saw that discontent was palpably growing, first as murmurs, then as an outright demand for the food that the people remembered from their time in Egypt. Would they follow Moses’s leadership into a “land flowing with milk and honey” if they had to fight for it? Some of our sages argue that the people should have relied on God’s promise, but some kind of reconnaissance would have been necessary even if they were willing to rely on God. Moses’s choice of scouts makes sense – they are the leaders who would themselves have to create genuine enthusiasm for the land and what it contained, and therefore worth the risks of moving towards it. If they themselves were keen, they would be able to encourage those that they led. What they saw when they scouted it out was a land as rich as God had promised, but well-defended, with fortified towns. Two of the scouts, Caleb and Joshua, deliver a confident message – we can do this. The others focus on how difficult it would be. And rather than risk it, a whole generation would die in the wilderness.



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It doesn't seem to have been the people's insistence on a reconnaissance mission that was the problem. But if the people's need to know what they were getting into was not the reason they were condemned to forty more years of wandering during which all but Caleb and Joshua would die, then what was? The answer seems to be in chapter 14:1-4: "...the people wept that night, and all the children of Israel murmured against Moses and against Aaron, and the whole congregation said to them, would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in the wilderness ... were it not better for us to return to Egypt? And they said to one another, let us make a captain, and let us return to Egypt." The betrayal was not that they weren't willing to rely on God's providence, it was that they rejected the whole enterprise of peoplehood under the leadership of Moses. As Nehama Liebowitz puts it, "they were afraid of the responsibilities of freedom, the dangers involved in securing it." The uncertainty of the future made them long for the past.

I think that for many of us, the ever-present fear and ambiguity that we are living through in these unprecedented times has the same effect on us as existential uncertainty did on the children of Israel. We too long for a past we fondly recall, the world that existed before the pandemic, and we want to return to it. But just as the children of Israel had no promised land behind them, only the risky one in front of them, so, too, we have no past to return to. The next year or two will be a day-to-day exploration of the unknown, and when the pandemic is truly over, it will leave behind a world transformed, in larger and smaller ways, many of them unpredictable from where we are now, this virtual wilderness we are wandering in. We cannot tame the uncertainty that lies before us, but we can imagine the world we want ultimately to live in, and imagining it is the first step towards achieving it. For me, it would be a world in which there is more justice, more stewardship of the natural world we all share, more recognition of the value of our own homes and the need to make home a reality for those without. And yes, using technology that was invented for many reasons, but now serves to bring us together in ways we couldn't have envisioned, but can no longer imagine living without.

That is the message I want to take from this week's reading – a call to envision to work to perfect the world, knowing that though we may not see the outcome, we are nonetheless obligated to work towards it. In the words of Rabbi Tarfon in Pirke Avot, "It is not up to you to finish the work, yet you are not free to avoid it."

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