

## Shelach Lecha – Living in Fear July 1, 2016

The Israelites are freed from Egypt, physically if not mentally. They have received Torah at Sinai from God. They have marched to the land that God has promised them. The stage is set for a dramatic entry into the land. What could possibly go wrong? Well, the people, according to Torah. God commands Moses to send spies, but they report back after forty days that although the land is flowing with milk and honey, the inhabitants are like giants and that the people are like grasshoppers to them. Then “the whole community broke into loud cries, and the people wept that night. All the Israelites railed against Moses and Aaron. “If only we had died in the land of Egypt,” the whole community shouted at them, “or if only we might die in this wilderness! (Num. 14:1-2)

Torah is very clear that this is all the people – *vatisa KOL ha'eidah* – and ALL the community broke out into loud cries (Num. 14:1). When I read this, I find myself asking, “Really?” Every single person was of one mind? I’ve been a Rabbi for twelve years now, and I’m not sure I can ever remember seeing a Jewish community entirely of one mind. So, were all the people really of one mind or is this hyperbole, and if it is hyperbole, why is it here?

Especially after having come off a recent British referendum, in which 52% or people voted one way and 48% voted another, I find it very difficult to imagine all the people being afraid. The men, maybe. After all, they were the ones who were going into the land to fight and if they’re being told that their opponents are giants who make them look like grasshoppers then it makes sense that they would be afraid. But the women? Would they be afraid for their men, for their security? Perhaps. Would the children be afraid for their fathers? Perhaps. But the entire community? That just seems odd. What would be the reason that the entire people would be afraid?

I would suggest that a fair amount of the book of Numbers is a narrative about the struggle for identity. It’s not just a struggle of the Israelites themselves, but also of Moses and Aaron and, indeed, even of God. So, in this Torah portion, for example, God has had enough with the Israelites and says to Moses, “How long will this people spurn Me, and how long will they have no faith in Me despite all the signs that I have performed in their midst. I will strike them with pestilence and disown them, and I will make of you a nation far more numerous than they!” (Num. 14:11-12). The relationship between God and the people has totally broken down to the point that God wants to wipe them out and start again with Moses’ descendants. Moses has to intervene, and uses a most extraordinary argument – what would the

Egyptians say? If they heard that God who brought them out of Egypt then killed them, it would look bad for God. God forgives the Israelites but decides that everyone of that generation shall die in the wilderness, except for Joshua and Caleb, the two spies who brought back positive reports. This is a perfect example of the struggle for Israelite identity in the face of Moses and God. Or, perhaps better put, the struggle in the Book of Numbers is a struggle of three focal points of identity and their triumvirate relationship. We tend to assume that there is a chain of leadership – the people, the tribal heads, Moses, God – and Torah certainly presents it in that way. But on the level of identity, as opposed to of power, there are three elements in this narrative. The Israelites are struggling for their identity, ripped out of Egypt and slave mentality in very little time with essentially no therapy. Moses is struggling for his identity as the reluctant leader of a difficult people. And God's identity is also in flux between a caring God, a demanding God, and a vengeful God. None of the three units of identity know how to behave towards each other, which is what makes for the fascinating dynamic in the narrative.

So, perhaps when Torah talks of “all the community” what it's really doing is focusing on the identity struggle of Israel at this crucial point. This is about Israel's identity in the face of top-down leadership models from Moses and from God, a leadership model that, I would suggest, is critiqued in Torah. We know that leadership is not Moses' natural forte when his father-in-law Jethro has to come and help him manage his leadership role. And we know that sometimes Moses gets so angry with the people, to the point that his anger gets the better of him and he, too, is barred from entering Canaan. In that sense, Moses is no better than the rest of the people. And that, I think, is the point. Moses isn't raised a leader, he is selected as one out of the blue by God later in life. He has absolutely no training at all. He openly resists being selected to lead the people. So, when he is pulled apart from the people, separated from them, he reinforces that distinction the only way he knows how, which is to denigrate them. As a leader, he gets frustrated with their errant ways. He doesn't know how to bring the best out of them, he just berates them and, in so doing, infantilises them. Moses' zeal isn't for God's word per se, it's for his demonstration of God-given power over the people. I say this because, for example, when God tells Moses on Sinai to kill the leaders of the Rebellion, Moses insists that everyone who leads the Rebellion should be killed. He supercedes God's word and orders that more people be killed. Why would he be so bloodthirsty if he were just following God's word? God selects Moses and separates him from the people, which has a terrible effect both this week and next week, when we look at the Torah portion of Korach, the individual who leads an open rebellion against Moses. By being separated from the people, by constantly

berating them, Moses disempowers them. So, when they have to go and scout the land themselves, they bring their fear and inadequacy into their report of the land.

It doesn't matter that God already laid waste to Egypt, the most powerful nation around, in front of their very eyes. It doesn't matter that God has fed them in the wilderness, despite the fact that they should have starved. None of this matters for the Israelites. All that matters is that they feel small, like grasshoppers. They live their lives in fear of constant reprimand. They doubt themselves just as Moses and God doubt them. They're not empowered to do better, they're reminded of how wretched they are. As much as people like to critique Torah for being outdated, I think it's extremely prescient here. If you constantly talk negatively to a person or, indeed, to a people, they will – at least until they rebel – start to believe you and reinforce what you're saying by changing their behaviour. But, if you constantly talk positively to a person or, indeed, to a people, they will also start to believe you and will aim to be the person or people you clearly cherish.

So, despite my initial doubt, maybe this wasn't hyperbole. Maybe this was the whole community. After all, words count, they change the way we feel. Words from leaders can be particularly influential. I think this is why in *Pirke Avot*, Rabbi Eliezer says, "Warm yourself by the fire of the Sages, but beware of their embers, lest you be burnt - for their bite is the bite of a fox, their sting is the sting of a scorpion, their hiss is the hiss of a serpent, and all their words are like fiery coals." (*Pirkei Avot* 2:10) Most of us assume that Torah is a lesson on how to be a good Jew, on what being Israel really means. But what if at the same time it is very clearly directed towards leaders, and trying to show them how to be good leaders. When we read Torah, we read of stubborn and rebellious Israelites and we empower ourselves not to be like them. But maybe they're only that way because Moses, and also God, don't help them properly transition from slavery to freedom. Maybe Moses and God almost capitalize on the slave mentality to attempt to create an obedient people. The word for slavery is *avodah*, and the word for worship is also *avodah*. It's service to a higher power. And the Israelites, herded like the sheep that Moses knows to lead, move from one vengeful ruler to another. They are never given the opportunity to grow, to face their fears, and to be fully empowered. Even when they fight the Amalekites, they only win when Moses' arms are raised high, not because they fought stronger or better.

The people of Israel are a fearful people. They are taught to be afraid by Pharaoh and, instead of freeing them from fear, Moses and God use that fear to try to shape the people. But it fails. In Deuteronomy when Moses addresses the people for the final time, he's very clear that they shall rebel again, that they cannot be trusted. He has led the people to the land physically but he has failed to free them from

their emotional chains that were formed in Egypt. They are still bound to slavery, to service, to fear.

We can learn from this. We can learn that the way we talk to each other can have a permanent effect. We can learn to try to speak positively of others – to their faces and about them. We can learn that fear is something that is learned, and that can be unlearned, but only if we try. And we can learn that if we do not transcend our fears, others can capitalize on them and use our fear to solidify themselves in a negative power relationship with us. So, we learn this week to try to be different from the spies, to try to shed our fear, to remember to live our lives out of love and not fear.

*Kol ha'olam kulo gesher tzar me'od, v'ha'ikar lo l'fached k'lal* – the whole world is a narrow bridge, and the most important thing is to not be afraid.