

WEEKLY PARASHA

By Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh HaYeshiva and Dean

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Parashat Shelach

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Shelach is a story of leaders as much as it is a story of the people. It is a story of poor leaders and of good leaders. The poor leaders—10 of the 12 spies—saw the challenges that confronted them in the land of Canaan and ran: “We are not able to go up against the people; for they are stronger than we.” (Bamidbar 13:31) The good leaders—Yehoshua and Calev—saw these challenges and pushed forward: “Let us go up at once, and possess it; for we are well able to overcome it.” (13:30) What accounts for this difference?

The answer is fear. Why did the leaders sin, and why did Bnei Yisrael sin? They saw the hand of God in Egypt, at Har Sinai, and in the Wilderness, and yet they were unable to believe that God would save them. Their reaction was the same as the people’s reaction at the Red Sea. Even for a people who have seen all the miracles, who have all the reasons to believe in God, faith will falter when confronted with fear. When a person is afraid all he can see is the object of his fear. Fear is irrational. Fear paralyzes. Because of fear, the people prefer to go back and be slaves. The people prefer to stay in the Wilderness, or better, to go back to Egypt, rather than to confront their fears.

The answer to fear is faith. Fear sees only obstacles. Faith sees opportunities: “We are able

to overcome it!” This is what separates good leadership from bad. A leadership based on fear is no leadership at all. Good leadership must be based on faith: faith in God, faith in Torah, faith in others, and faith in one’s self. A leadership of faith takes one into the Promised Land.

In many ways, this is what distinguishes Modern Orthodoxy. In many ways, Orthodoxy has become a religion of fear: fear of the outside world, fear of asking hard questions, fear of delegitimization, fear of being honest with ourselves about our own shortcomings. It is much safer, some say, to reject the outside world and to protect ourselves in a cloistered environment.

There is so much to be afraid of in the larger, outside world. There is fear of what will happen if we confront postmodernism, archeology, science, history, philosophy, academic Talmud, Biblical criticism, feminism, and homosexuality. There is fear of what will happen if we honestly confront spousal abuse, rabbinic sexual abuse, alcoholism, and drug abuse; a fear of genuinely addressing the marginalization of single mothers, converts, the developmentally disabled, those suffering from depression, and children with special needs. Many in the Orthodox community have chosen to look at these challenges and say: “We cannot go up, for they are stronger than

we!” The response is to put up walls. The response is to stay in the desert.

It is not just a fear of the outside world. It is a fear of losing full control, of granting the people a degree of autonomy. It is scary for some to imagine individuals and communities—or even local rabbis—thinking for themselves. For some, the answer to this is to have communal issues decided by a Gadol and his *da'as Torah*, to say: “Is it not better for us to return to Egypt? Perhaps we were slaves in Egypt, but everything was secure and predictable. In Egypt, someone else did the thinking for us.”

This is a leadership of fear. This is a *yiddishkeit* destined to stay in the desert and never go into the Promised Land.

Calev was a different leader. He had a *ruach acheret*, a different spirit. He saw the formidable challenges, and most certainly experienced fear. But he did not give into it. He responded to the fear with a reaffirming of his faith.

And so must we do. We must trust in God. And we must trust in the Torah. Trust in its ability to confront the real challenges of life. Trust that it can be taken out of its shell, that it can be brought to bear not just on pots and pans, but also on theological struggles, on the economy, and on injustice. We need to have enough faith in the Torah that we can honestly face up to the challenges of *aggunah*, of homosexuality, of universalism and particularism. Trust that it can honestly confront archeology, science, history, and feminism, not by rejecting them, but by embracing them and showing us a larger truth, a deeper truth.

We need religious leaders who can trust not only in the Torah, but also the people. Leaders who do not withhold information or misrepresent *halakha*, out of a false belief that the people can't handle the truth. Leaders who value the expertise and the voices of every member of the community, respecting them and including their voices in its *psak* and its decision process.

A leadership and a Torah that is based on faith, not fear, will be open to hear other voices, even opposing voices. The natural response is to try to shut these voices down, as even Yehoshua did when Eldad and Meidad were prophesying in the camp: “My master, Moshe, restrain them.” It requires a great leader to resist this response, to recognize that we as a people will only be richer, only be wiser, if we can listen to and respect visions that are different than our own. It is a rare leader who has enough faith in himself that he can welcome challenge.

What we most desperately need are religious leaders who have enough faith in the people. Religious leaders whose deepest desire is not to lead the people, but to empower them. Such leaders know that they only truly succeed not when everyone follows their vision, but when they have inspired each individual to find his or her own unique vision and to follow it with a passion. We need leaders who can say: “Who would give that all the nation of God would be prophets, that God should give God's spirit upon them!” We need leaders who will take us into the Promised Land.

Visit Rabbi Linzer's yeshiva blogs:
rabbidovlinzer.blogspot.com
www.the-daf.com

ALUMNUS D'VAR TORAH

On Parashat Shelach

By Rabbi Chaim Posner (YCT '10)

You know that feeling you get when you are rereading a book that doesn't end well, but each time you read it you hold out hope—against all rational thought—that maybe, somehow, things will be different this time? That's the way I feel each year when we read Parashat Shelach. I know it is not going to end well, but each time, I hope that maybe it will have a better outcome. The People of Israel were preparing to enter the Land of Israel. They had just one final task to fulfill, to dispatch twelve of their most highly respected men to scout the land. Moshe instructed them, amongst other things, to bring back some of the native fruit. They returned with the fruit and with the positive assessment that the Land “*zavat chalav u'dvash*,” that it flows with milk and honey. (Bamidbar 13:27) How different the course of Jewish history might have been if they would have only stopped there. For it was in response to their negative report that the People of Israel cried, “*balayla hahu*,” on that very night. (Bamidbar 14:1) According to our sages, that was the night of the 9th of Av, concerning which God said, “You are crying for no reason on this night; in the future there will be a reason for you to cry.” (Rashi to Tehillim 106:27) Had they just stopped with “*eret zavat chalav u'dvash*.” They were so close.

But they didn't stop there. They continued, uttering the word that sealed their fate: “*Efes*,” however or but. When someone makes a positive statement and follows it with “however,” what comes next is not going to be good. In this case, it certainly wasn't. “*Efes ki az ha'am hayoshev ba'aretz*,” however the people who dwell in the land are too powerful. (Bamidbar 13:28) Too powerful? Did they not yet know that God was on their side? Was this country more powerful than the world's superpower, Egypt, with which God had dealt so handily? Why were they so afraid?

Their fear is actually quite understandable. It is human nature to be afraid of change. We are all afraid of the unknown, reluctant to step into new situations. We'd like

things to remain as they are, sometimes even to our own detriment. After all, did the People of Israel not—on more than one occasion—yearn to return to Egypt? Life in Egypt may have been bad, but at least it was familiar.

The key to new beginnings is faith: faith in God and faith in self. These two types of faith go hand in hand, and both can be difficult to sustain. Doubt creeps in all the time. There is always an “*efes*” lurking just around the corner. Avoiding it may require a leap: a leap of faith in God and a leap of action, trusting in the self and making the first move. But if we can stay positive and believe deeply in God and in ourselves, we may be much closer to the Promised Land than we realize.

FROM THE PRESIDENT

Jet-Age Shelach Lecha: Send ye out students of Torah far and wide...

By Rabbi Asher Lopatin

If it's time for Shabbat in Riverdale, what time is it in Nairobi, Kenya? That's a legitimate question for two of our students: Ben Elton, Ph.D., and Lt. Andrew Scheer have set out on a trip to visit YCT *musmach* Rabbi Brachyahu Schonthal, his wife Rebecca, and their child, Ori, in Nairobi. Their two-week mission is to teach, support, and bring the message of modern Orthodoxy to East Africa. Rav Brachyahu started his first pulpit just eight months ago, only weeks before the tragic shooting at the Westgate Mall in Nairobi. Though the Israeli embassy and the large Israeli community provide important companionship for our alumnus and his family, Brachyahu and Rebecca are the rabbi and rebbetzin for all the Jews of Kenya – there is no other religious Jewish presence. But beyond the mitzvah of connecting to Jewish communities everywhere is the mitzvah of “going out” and supporting a rabbinic family half way across the world. I know the leadership of YCT is with me in wanting Shelach Lecha – Go out and teach Torah! Go out and connect with Jews! – to pulsate through the veins of our students. Ben and Andrew gladly took up this mission, carefully planned by our Director of Alumni

STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

Affairs, Ruthie Simon, and they will be blogging daily about their adventures in Africa.

Closer to home, our students spread out all over the United States this Shavuot: from Boston, Massachusetts, to Birmingham, Alabama; and from Baltimore, Maryland, to Los Angeles, California. Of course, a fair number of them were in New York as well. *Aniyei ircha kodmin* can mean, “The poor of your city come first.” (Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metzia 71a) However, in this context, I would translate *aniyei* as, “Those who answer the call of Torah and are looking for the message of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah” – those come first in the multiple cities where our alumni and supporters find themselves. We have to be ready to answer the call of Torah in any and all locations, with our newest recruits as well as our seasoned veterans. What an honor for me to see our students teaching and learning in Los Angeles with Rav Yosef Kanefsky, the first honorary *musmach* of YCT.

Still closer to home, the challenge of functioning as a vital community center of Torah right here in Riverdale remains. I hope that our students and I can continue to support our alumni and all those who answer the call to learn Torah. I hope even more that we can begin to connect our amazing students with the people – adults and youth – of Riverdale, New Rochelle, and other local communities, people who are seeking the best in Torah and the openness, inclusivity, and passion for learning that YCT represents. We must maintain and enhance our practice of *shelach* – send out – while making sure that we remember *lecha* – for yourself: We must see to it that YCT is sending out an open and inclusive Torah internally as well as externally.

From our Rosh HaYeshiva and *rebbeim* to our staff and students, YCT is committed to *shelach lecha*. I am confident that whether in Nairobi, Santa Monica, or just off the Henry Hudson Parkway, Jews need and want Torah, and it is our duty to teach it, to learn it, and to live it.

Name:

Garth Silberstein

Graduating Class:

2016

Special Interest:

Jewish

Environmentalism



About Garth:

Garth Silberstein is a leader in the growing Jewish environmental movement. He aspires to teach about the intersection of Torah and environmentalism, and promote sustainable living, by serving as a pulpit rabbi.

To read more about the contributions Garth is making to the Jewish community’s understanding of, and relationship to, environmentalism, and how he hopes to help shape a greener future for Jews everywhere, see our June 13 newsletter.

If you do not receive the YCT newsletter in your email and would like to, please contact us at sleeve@yctorah.org.