

***Shelach* – Grasshoppers and Angels**
Silent Center of Things
5775 Text Study by Yael Shy

Parshat Shelach takes us back into the clouded vision and the fearful hearts of the Israelites as they wander their way through the desert.

In this week's narrative, Moshe sends a delegation of princes to spy on the land that God has promised them.

The spies come back with the news – the land is good, they say, no question about that. They go on:

“However [Efes] the people who inhabit the country are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large; moreover, we saw the Anakites [giants] there...In our eyes we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we were in their eyes.” (Numbers 13:28, 33)

Efes, the unusual word that translates here as “however,” actually means *nothing*, or *zero*. Avivah Zornberg notes that this pivot in their response highlights the nothingness that the spies feel about themselves.

What the Spies **see**, therefore, convulses them not simply with fear but with a sense of intimate *efes*: They are annihilated. The word *aliyah* – *going up* to the Land – is suffused with the sense of *looking upward* at the contemptuous eyes of the gigantic inhabitants of that land. **To see, for them, is to allow the world to mirror their deepest life.**” (122, emphasis mine)

There is a problem with the spies' vision. What they see is confused by the overwhelming fear and self-loathing they feel about themselves, causing them to see certain danger and failure where there might not be any. Mishnah Tanchuma drives this point home:

They said, “we looked like grasshoppers in our own eyes.” God said, “This I can overlook. But, ‘And so we looked in their eyes’ – here I am angry! Did you know how I made you look in their eyes? Who told you that you didn't look like angels in their eyes?” (Shelach, 7)

The Israelites, despite all evidence to the contrary, are still so consumed with hatred for themselves, they see hatred and failure *everywhere*, unable to imagine what God imagines for them. They want to go back to Egypt (again), the place where hatred and death was *guaranteed*, rather than face the scary and overwhelming possibility that they might actually succeed on their journey.

This parsha is where God gives the fatal decree that the generation of freed slaves (with the exception of Caleb and Joshua) won't make it to the promised land, but will die in the desert. The text sounds like a punishment, with an angry and exasperated God condemning the people to a terrible future in which "their corpses fall in the wilderness." (Numbers 14:32)

Read through a psychological lens, however, God is simply stating the truth rather than making a decree. The parts of ourselves that cannot see clearly – the parts that cling with a death grip to old images of ourselves as defective, powerless, and unworthy *will* have to die so that we can grow into who are meant to be. We cannot kill these parts of ourselves, as God doesn't outright kill all the people. We have to sit with them in meditation, understand them as much as we can, and see them as parts of ourselves, but not the whole of ourselves. We have to see and strengthen the "next generation" within us – our holiness, compassion, and love, so that these self-conceptions become more reliable and more vibrant than the delusional visions of self-hate.

At the end of the parsha, we are given a tool to help us to do this. God tells us to tie *tzitzit*, or fringes, to the four corners of our garments,

39 This shall be fringes for you, and when you **see** it, you will remember all the commandments of the One to perform them, and you shall not wander after your hearts and **after your eyes after which you are going astray.**

לְטוּהֵיָה לָכֶם לְצִיצֵת וּרְאִיתֶם אֹתוֹ
וּזְכַרְתֶּם אֶת כָּל מִצְוֹת יְיָ וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם
וְלֹא תִתְּוּרוּ אַחֲרַי לְבַבְכֶם וְאַחֲרַי עֵינֵיכֶם
אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם זֹנִים אַחֲרֵיהֶם:

40 So that you shall remember and perform all My commandments and **you shall be holy** to your God.

מִלְמַעַן תִּזְכְּרוּ וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֶת כָּל מִצְוֹתַי
וְהִייתֶם קְדוֹשִׁים לֵאלֹהֵיכֶם:

The tzitzit are corrective lenses for our self-conception. When we look at them, we are meant to remember who we really are – holy and loved. Rashi points out that the word for "corner" in the text is also the word for "wing," using as proof the line that God says to the people in Exodus, "I bore you on the wings of eagles and brought you to me." (Exodus 19:4) Each time we put on a tallit, we are to remember this "flight" towards God.

Rashi also explains that the reason there are four of them is that the number "corresponds to the four expressions of redemption that were said in Egypt: "I will take you out...I will save you...I will redeem you...I will take you" (Exod. 6:6-7). - [Mid. Aggadah]" Once again, we remember that we were saved, we were chosen, and our task is to act with holiness as a result. This memory of who we are and what are relationship is with the Oneness helps us to resist "going astray" after old ways of seeing in the world that are no longer accurate or helpful.

According to the Talmud, Moshe, more than any other prophet or human, “saw through a clear lens” (*b’aspaklariah meirah*). He was awake – seeing the world without overlay of projection or distortion. With reminders like *tzit tzit*, we can wake up and try and see more like Moshe.

Practice Guidance

If you wear a *tallit* or *tzitzit*, slow down and take extra care the next time you put it on. When you say the prayer, allow your eyes to settle on the fringes and remember the times in your life when you emerged out of danger or pain. Feel the knots and remember the description of yourself as *holy* and the commandment to act with holiness. Notice the thoughts or temptations that are pulling you away from present-moment awareness, take a breath and return, feeling yourself under your angel-like wings.

If you do not wear *tzitzit*, do this process with your clothes the next time you get dressed. Slow down and feel the fabric wrapping you in intimacy with all that is. Breath, remember, and return.