

Shelach-Lecha (Numbers 13:1 - 14:45)

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Perhaps the greatest human tragedy is our inability to deal with a plague that has surfaced over and over again, from generation to generation. It is a disease that prevents human beings from ever achieving their highest goals: from societies that aspire to greatness to individuals who have greatness within them and yet fail to achieve all the promise that lies before them. This disease is our own lack of self-confidence, our fear of conquering great adversaries and our lack of faith in our own resolve and strength. We confront this disease in the story of the twelve spies sent to reconnoiter the Promised Land.

There, in the desert, with the Promised Land within their grasp, Moses sends twelve spies to examine the land and bring back reports. Upon their return, ten of the twelve cry out to Moses that the land that God had promised to them was filled with giants and compared to them, "we look like grasshoppers." And despite the fact that the land is a good and healthy land, flowing, as they say, with milk and honey, the ten are gripped and ravaged with fear - a fear that not only overtakes them but, percolates out into the community of Israel, until the entire community feels frozen and impotent, powerless to overcome the giants that inhabit that land of promise. Yet, in this sea of self-doubt and self-pity, two individuals - Joshua and Caleb - stand up to say, "possessing the land is wholly in our grasp, we are not grasshoppers, we can do whatever we set out to do." Their confidence is drowned out in a sea of whining, and God decrees that because of their lack of confidence, the Children of Israel will have to wander forty more years, so that those who lacked the confidence will die out and a new generation will rise up to take possession of the land that God had promised.

So often we, ourselves, exclaim that the problems that lie before us are gigantic and we, in comparison, are mere grasshoppers, unable to stand up, unable to reach out and make a difference. Yet, as pervasive as this plague is in our history, in each generation there have been individuals who have stood up in the face of challenge and refuse to be beaten down. They cry out, "We will move ahead. We will do our best to realize our destiny and to fulfill our promise."

When presented with the idea of creating a Jewish homeland the great majority in the Jewish community said it was never an attainable goal. Theodor Herzl, the great founder of modern Zionism, exclaimed "Im tziru ayn zo agaddah" (אין צירן און אגאדה) "It is no fairy tale / if you will it, it is no dream.") When confronted with the enormity of the task, instead of backing down, Herzl articulated a dream that he believed was in our grasp. And it was the strength of faith that moved the dream to reality.

Today, too, our knees buckle with the enormity of the tasks that lay before us. Some in our community cry out that there is little hope for our liberal vision of a Jewish future in Israel in the face of the giant behemoth ultra-Orthodox community. Who are we with our paucity of liberal adherents to stand up - yet, we revel in the achievements of the Israel Religious Action Centre and the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism, as well as the open doors of Beit Shmuel and Mercaz Shimshon, and other institutions throughout Israel allied with our vision. Members of the liberal Jewish community began to unite and plot a strategy to retain our hard-won rights and secure other rights for those who espouse a liberal Jewish view.

In our own communities throughout the world, it is easy to get caught up in this sea of self-doubt by stating that we will never be able to address fully the challenges we face: violence, prejudice, poverty, discord. Yet, every day there are people who, in their own small way, stand up, get involved, and they deserve o

ur thanks.

The lessons of this week's parashah are told over and over again. Though the scenarios may change, the emotions do not. Far too often, the majority is cowed into inaction and it remains for a strong and proud minority to wake the masses from their reverie to move forward in achievement. In the end, it was Joshua and Caleb who were correct, and it was Joshua who led the next generation into the Promised Land. It took pride and faith and belief, and a certain amount of spunk added in, to say, "Even if they are giants, we can stand up before them. Even if we seem small, we can rise up to meet the challenge."

Thank God for those individuals who make us see beyond our narrow horizon, who see the enormity of the task before them and get busy rather than cower in a corner. How sad for that generation of slaves who could not realize their destiny because of their own lack of self confidence. How sad it is, that people never live to fulfill the best that is in them. The story remains as a stark reminder of a plague that will continue to affect us until we, as a community, are willing to stand up and say "We are all ready to meet the challenge and make the world into the world it could and should be." We do this when we confront the crumbling schools in our cities and demand that they be repaired. We do this when we reach out to those who are homeless and provide shelter. We do this when in the face of those bent on evil, we cry out to stop. And we do this when we turn back to the source of our faith for guidance, remembering our covenant with God and our responsibility to be God's partners - and then we rise to the occasion.

For the sake of Joshua and for the sake of all those who in the face of a vocal majority who wallow in self-doubt let us commit to stand up and reach out for greatness. Shelach-lecha - Get a move on!