



## Parashat Shlech Lecha: Choosing Strength

Rabbi Elisha Wolfin

Dear Friends,

Bnei Yisrael have arrived! A year and three months have elapsed since the Exodus from Egypt, and here it is, spread out before them in all its glory: the Promised Land!

Twelve scouts are sent on a very important mission to tour the Promised Land. However, we read conflicting purposes - God says one thing, Moshe another:

**" And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: 'Send men, that they may tour the land of Canaan, which I give to the children of Israel; of every tribe of their fathers shall you send a man, every one a prince among them... And Moses sent them to tour the land of Canaan, and said unto them: Go up here into the South, and go up into the mountains; and see the land, what it is; and the people that dwell there, whether they are strong or weak, whether they are few or many; and what the land is that they dwell in, whether it is good or bad; and what cities they are that they dwell in, whether in camps, or in strongholds; and what the land is, whether it is fat or lean, whether there is wood therein, or not. And be strengthened...' "** (Numbers 13: 1-20)

God's purpose is vague. Moshe, on the other hand, is sending them on a fact-finding mission, or so it seems.

I find this very odd! What if the scouts do not like the Land? Will God give Bnei Yisrael a different one? And if not, why is this mission necessary at all?

The Torah is not definitive regarding whose idea this is in the first place. The story is actually told twice. The first time is in our parasha, it seems that the initiative is God's, albeit Moshe defines the goals. The second time, in Deuteronomy, forty years later, Moshe will recount this incident to the new generation born in the wilderness. There he will say that the initiative actually came from the People, and that God had no part in it. The later version makes perfect sense: the people are concerned and want to know more about where they are heading. In our parasha, however, where the initiative is clearly God's, the rationale is very unclear.

I would like to suggest that the scouts are not sent forth to meet the Land, but rather to look at themselves in the mirror... and to grow! I base this idea on the last words quoted above: **"And be strengthened!"**

I am fairly certain that these words do not appear in the brief that Mossad agents get

before they embark on a daring mission, suggesting that the mission in our Parasha is not one of espionage at all.

When Moshe gives them their mission he already knows that they are going to encounter their own insignificance, their own limitations and weakness – and this is why Moshe tells them to be strengthened. He instructs them, “when you see your own reflection in the mirror – how little you are compared to the giant Philistines, how fragile you are compared to the Canaanite fortifications, how foreign you are compared to the local population – overcome your fear and be strengthened! We need you to return to us strengthened. You are the leaders of the People. We need you to undergo a transformation, so that you can lead your People through the challenges that lie ahead. You will return, and you will tell us about the Land, and you will instill courage and hope in the People”.

This explains the severity of the ten scouts' transgression when they brought back their negative report. They were not denouncing the Land at all. Far from it. They affirm how wonderful it is. But they spoke poorly about themselves. They said, "We were so small, weak, and insignificant compared to the locals. We don't stand a chance."

"Be strengthened" is a beautiful and meaningful invitation for us too. Life is not easy. The world is difficult and even brutal. Around us there are many fortifications – human and natural. The world is terrifying. Furthermore, no one survives life's journey! All that's left is... to be strengthened; to grow internally; to increase our spiritual resources.

But how? How does one find strength in the face of so many challenges?

This Parasha gives us a clue: Go out and scout the Land. Notice, every matter and every thing in the world contains life-giving strength. It may be invisible to the naked eye. Just as gravity can be witnessed but not seen, so too, the vitality one can draw from life's challenges, hardships, and adventures cannot be seen. But when we witness an individual who has persevered, we know we are seeing a great person.

Scientists research the visible and measurable energy available. The fitness trainer will tell you exactly how to increase your muscle mass. But those tending to the spirit will teach us how to seek the vitality offered to all who choose to be strengthened by the Land's hardships. A good scientist might indeed advise Moshe not to enter the Land at all, because physically the People are not fit to conquer it. But the Torah is not interested in the physicality of life. The Torah is all about the human encounter with the Divine. Here, in our Parasha, the Divine is the mysterious strength offered to those who are willing to fathom its existence, and therefore able to really experience such an encounter and be strengthened by it.

The leaders of the People are sent forth to gauge their spiritual connectedness. They are expected to discover that it is weak, and therefore they are reminded: the mission is for you to rise to the occasion! Be leaders! Be strengthened!

It takes an additional 38 years for the mission to be accomplished. It actually happens in this week's Haftorah, when two scouts are sent by Joshua - one of the original twelve scouts, and one of the two who said, "Yes, we can!" Now he is the new leader of the People and the scouts are being sent to Jericho, the first fortified city Bnai Yisrael will encounter upon entering. The people of the Land have not changed since the last visit almost 40 years earlier. They are just as strong, just as giant. But Bnei Yisrael have changed. They have become stronger, much stronger, and are now able to meet the challenges that lie ahead.

This Shabbat is dedicated to the choices we make: Do we see the physical reality as it may appear to us, or do we seek out the vitality and life-enhancing strength that is offered to us in every challenge and every encounter we face?

Be strengthened!

Shabbat Shalom,  
Elisha