

Parashat Sh'lach Lecha: The Hero's Journey on the Yellow Brick Road

Dear Friends,

Parashat Sh'lach Lecha is one of the most human parashot in the Torah. It describes fear, despair, and the price we pay in our lives for our fears.

A year and three months have passed since the Exodus from Egypt, and Bnei Yisrael have finally arrived. They are at Kadesh Barnea, on the cusp between the Wilderness and the Promised Land. Twelve spies are sent - one from each tribe - to tour the Land and return with information.

The spies head out on their journey of discovery, following the proverbial yellow brick road.

Forty days later they return. Their hands carry proof of the abundance of the Land, but their lips carry frightening news. The Land is, indeed, wonderful, flowing with milk and honey, just as promised; but it is fortified, and inhabited by people of large proportions (referring to the Philistines, who were, in fact, much bigger than the Semitic people who inhabited the area). Two of the twelve spies think otherwise. They agree with the facts that the others relate - that the land is wonderful, that its cities are well fortified, and that its residents giant - but they said **“Let us by all means go up, and we shall gain possession of it, for we shall surely overcome it”** (Bamidbar 13:30). Years later, this sentiment became the slogan of the successful campaign of the first black presidential candidate: “Yes we can”.

But this slogan, which helped Obama enter the promised land - the White House - does not work in our parasha. Bnei Yisrael don't believe Yehoshua and Calev, and God threatens to destroy the People and replace them with a new nation from the seed of Moshe. Moshe, as usual, calms God down (i.e. “what will the goyim say about You”) so a compromise is reached: for the forty days that the spies toured the Land, the People will continue to wander in the wilderness for forty years until the present generation dies off.

The great hero of the parasha is Calev Ben Yefuneh. It is he, and not Yehoshua, who silences the ten other spies and the frightened people. It is he, and not Yehoshua, who coins the term “we shall surely overcome”, or “yes we can.” This is why God declares **“But My servant Caleb, because he was imbued with a different spirit and was loyal to Me—him will I**

bring into the land that he entered, and his offspring shall hold it as a possession.”

(14:24)

Calev has “a different spirit”! What was this different spirit that beats within him?

It seems as if it is the spirit of bravery and deep religious belief. But most classic interpreters think otherwise.

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, basing his explanation on classic interpreters, writes: “This means that he changed his mind over time, whereas Yehoshua thought this way from the beginning.” In other words, as opposed to Yehoshua, who was very close to Moshe, and therefore agreed with his point of view to begin with, Calev began the information-gathering journey with a similar mindset to the rest of the spies, i.e., a “different spirit.” But in the course of the journey he undergoes a deep spiritual transformation - he “was loyal,” filled with Divine spirit, faith and courage.

“A different spirit”, therefore, is actually the spirit of fear, and not heroism!

There are other interpretations, but I like this one for two main reasons:

1. Calev Ben Yefuneh, as opposed to Yehoshua, undergoes a transformation. Fortunate is the person who is born with deep faith and heroism, but greater is the one who undergoes a “hero’s journey”, to quote Joseph Campbell, Erich Neumann, and others; a person who has succeeded in overcoming his fears, his doubts, and his despair. That is the person who will reach the Promised Land.
2. Based on this interpretation, the heroic spirit is THE spirit which humans strive for, whereas fear and despair - which are, of course, legitimate and important - are “a different spirit.” This awareness is important, for it gives us a spiritual direction as we are “working on ourselves”: to reconnect with THE spirit - that original spirit - which brought us into the world and continues to infuse us with life.

The hero’s journey involves leaving one’s comfort zone and facing our fears. At the end of the long journey, the hero returns home, to the Promised Land.

One of the best known “hero’s journeys” is the story of “The Wizard of Oz”. Dorothy is looking for the way home. On her journey - which takes place entirely within her own dreamscape - her deepest fears surface - that “different spirit.” At the end of the story, after she has discovered that fear and despair are actually a figment of her imagination, she “awakens”, both internally and externally, and this awakening brings her home.

In his book “The Hero with a Thousand Faces”, Joseph Campbell writes: "With the personifications of his destiny to guide and aid him, the hero goes forward in his adventure ...

The usual person is more than content, he is even proud, to remain within the indicated bounds, and popular belief gives him every reason to fear so much as the first step into the unexplored ...departure into the land of trials represented only the beginning of the long and really perilous path of initiatory conquests and moments of illumination. Dragons (giants) have now to be slain and surprising barriers passed—again, again, and again. Meanwhile there will be a multitude of preliminary victories, unsustainable ecstasies and momentary glimpses of the wonderful (promised) land."

The moment of the hero's awakening often occurs as a result of meeting a wise person along the journey. The Torah does not describe such a meeting (unless Yehoshua is that person), so our Sages, who apparently knew intuitively about "the hero's journey", had Calev meet wise elders, who indeed guide him on his path. Their midrashim relate that Calev left the group of scouts and went on his own (an important detail in "a hero's journey"!) to visit the burial cave of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs in Hebron. There, according to the midrash, he undergoes a deep transformation. Calev connects to the roots of his soul, to the spirit of heroism which was there inside of him always, but was concealed and covered by "a different spirit", one of imagined fears.

The end of Calev's journey is described in Yehoshua, Chapter 15: 13-14: **"In accordance with the LORD's command to Joshua, Caleb son of Jephunneh was given a portion among the Judites, namely, Kiriath-arba—that is, Hebron. ([Arba] was the father of Anak.) Caleb dislodged from there the three Anakites: Sheshai, Ahiman, and Talmi, descendants of Anak."** Calev overcomes the fearful giants that the spies were so afraid of - an imaginary fear which lengthened the journey by forty years.

Of all the scouts, only Calev returns home, to the property of Yehuda, which was where he belonged.

Interestingly, Calev's father's name was Yefuneh - "will turn away" - as if to hint that his son will one day turn away from the "different spirit" and return to his own inner Self.

Many years later, another young man - the young, anonymous David - will return to the same place, at the end of his heroic journey to the throne. He had already been secretly anointed as king many years earlier, but he could not inherit the throne until he completed his hero's journey. Like Calev before him, he will need to overcome a fearful giant - the famous Goliath - and only then can he inherit the crown and settle in Hebron. David will earn the throne not as a result of being anointed, but by virtue of his hero's journey - his journey of turning away from "a different spirit" - that spirit which paralyzed the nation of Israel at the time - to the spirit that was always there within him, but required a hero's journey in order to be revealed.

Calev Ben Yefuneh is the only hero in this week's parasha, because a hero's journey is the journey of an individual; it is the journey we each must take. The yellow brick road is open to everyone. It is not reserved for the few. However, even if an entire nation is on our side, and even if there are eleven other people on the road with us, the hero's journey is one which must be taken entirely on one's own.

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha