

Life, Waiting to be Lived
Yom Kippur 5771-September 2010
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“Send for yourselves men to scout the land of Canaan,
this land that I am giving to the children of Israel one man from each of the tribes.
So Moses sent them from the wilderness of Paran,
all of them were leaders of the children of Israel.”¹

The story is a famous one—
the twelve spies who explore the land of Canaan,
returning with fruit too big for only one man to carry,
only to tell Moses and the rest of the Israelites
that the land is one which devours its inhabitants,
a place where we appear like grasshoppers.

“We came to the land you sent us to;
it indeed flows with milk and honey,
and this is its fruit.
But, their cities are large, strong and well-protected.
The land is inhabited by giants.
The descendants of Amalek dwell in the south.
You remember them?
The people who attacked us from behind, in our desert wanderings.
Certainly we cannot attack these people,
for they are stronger than we.”²

And so goes the report of the majority,
ten out of the twelve.
Fearful of what they have seen and experienced,
anxious for what the future holds,
paralyzed by their lack of self-confidence.

But Caleb, one of the spies,
upon hearing the report of his fellow spies, immediately speaks up.
He says:

*Aloh Na'ale v'yarashnu otah
Ki Yahol nuhal la.*

¹ Numbers, 13:1-3

² Numbers 13:27-29; 31

Arise! Let us go, up to the land and we shall inherit it!
Surely we can do this.³

What is interesting about Caleb's words is what he does not say.
Caleb does not dispute the report of the 10 spies.
He doesn't disagree with their summary of what they saw.
Instead, it is his response that is different.

Joshua's response is also different.
He says,

“The land that we traversed and scouted is an exceedingly good land.
If Adonai is pleased with us, God will bring us into that land,
a land that flows with milk and honey, and give it to us.
Have no fear of the people of the country, for they are our prey.”⁴

Why, when seeing the very same things,
walking the very same earth,
do 10 respond with fear and trembling,
while two respond with courage and tenacity?
I suppose that if we could answer this question,
we would solve some mystery of human nature:
Why do some of us see the opportunities,
while others of us see the walls of a prison?

What lies at the heart of this story
is the problem of perception.
It is a theme that the rabbis clarify even further
in their numerous commentaries.

In the Talmud, Rava states:
The Holy One said:
I intended this for good but they thought it for bad.
I intended this for good, because wherever the spies went,
the chief of the village died,
so that the villagers would be consumed with his burial
and not inquire about the spies.
But they thought it for bad:
It is a land that devours its inhabitants.⁵

³ Numbers 13:30

⁴ Numbers 14:7-9

⁵ Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 35a

In other words, the Israelites claimed that the land of Canaan was a land that eats of its settlers because wherever they went, they saw death and grieving.
But according to the Talmud,
it was meant to be a blessing for them.
God intended it for good.
A blessing so the spies would remain hidden, unnoticed,
lest they be caught by the enemy and killed.
But the spies didn't see it that way.
Sometimes the things we think are curses
can in fact be blessings.

It's all a matter of perception.
It was a blessing that these 12 spies remained undetected in the land.
It was a blessing that they remained unharmed on their journey.
But, it was a blessing they couldn't see.
They were overcome with fear by what they saw in the land.
They interpreted the deaths as an example of what would happen to them.

Yet, Caleb and Joshua saw the same things,
the same sights, the same death.

So why did they have such a different reaction?

Commenting on the verse—

“They went and they came”

Rabbi Yohanan said in name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai:

There is a parallel between coming and going.

Just as they went up to the land with evil thoughts,
so too did they return from the land with evil thoughts.⁶

The Talmud teaches that the spies went into the land
with preconceived notions about what it would be,
and what they discovered,
because their hearts were not open,
confirmed their preconceived notions.
It was as we call it – a self-fulfilling prophecy.
Their ability to see was already narrow and limited.
They got exactly what they expected.

But Joshua and Caleb entered the land

⁶ Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 35a

with an open heart and spirit.
And because of that,
they perceived an alternative reality,
an alternative possibility.

It is true that there are some curses that really
are just that,
curses,
and no matter which way we turn the experience,
we can not make it become a blessing for us.
A terminal illness
Violence done to our body or our soul.
An untimely death.
But what about those moments that can be looked at differently?
The challenge of entering new territory
The challenge of having to change our station in life.
The challenge of how we will perceive what lies before us.

Our situation is very similar to the spies of the desert.
But there is one small but crucial and significant difference
between us and the them.

You see, we already live in the Promised Land.
The time for scouting a new land has long past.
We cannot send spies
to see how life is lived on the other side of the river.

And that was the ultimate sin of the Israelites --
for believing that one could investigate and evaluate a future life
before even living it.

There is no way we can examine what our future lives will look like.
It's not that I am against planning or dreaming about the future.
For without those dreams, we sleep through life.
But, sometimes,
we get so caught up in trying to investigate, and examine,
and worrying about how things will turn out.
We have no idea how things will turn out.
We can't send spies to figure out if that new home will be good enough
or if that new job will be good enough,
or if that new husband will be good enough.
We have to choose and live and have faith that it will be good enough,
that life, even, can be great.

Most of the time,
we worry about the yesterdays,
or we worry about the tomorrows.
But what living in the todays?

As we approach Rosh Hashanah,
we think back on the people we were in the year now past.
Were we good? Were we just? Did we hit the mark?
We think about our past.
And, then as we approach Yom Kippur
we look into the future.
We ask to be inscribed in the book of life for another year.
When we recite the Kol Nidre prayer,
we asked to be absolved of all future vows and promises.
We may confess our sins of the past, but we begin to anticipate the future.
These days are days of deep introspection, reflection, and review.
They are days of worry, and for good reason.

But tomorrow, each of us will wake up.
And the challenge will be – can we leave the deep reflection behind
and live the lives that have been waiting to be lived,
in the moment?
Tomorrow will not be about the past,
it will not be about the future.
Tomorrow will be about tomorrow.

The great sin of the spies
was not so much their report of the land.
It was the fact that the Israelites wanted spies in the first place,
to investigate this new home, this new land.
That was their sin.

As the children of Israel approached the River Jordan,
Moses says to them:
Go up, take possession of the land
as Adonai the God of your ancestors promised you.
Fear not and be not dismayed.

But then, all the Israelites came to Moses,
asking for spies to investigate the land
and bring back word of their journey.

The Hatam Sofer, commenting on this part of the Torah,

writes:

The Israelites wanted the spies to find out
whether the land was fat or lean,
whether one could earn a living in it,
whether it was possible to conquer the people living there –
**as if a human being can investigate and determine such matters –
and they failed.**⁷

The sin of the Israelites was the sin of demanding spies in the first place.
It was the sin of believing that it is possible
to investigate and determine life before even living it.
It was the sin of believing they could live a life ready-made.

We already live in the Promised Land.
Another one will not appear.
We have a choice to make –
to see its light,
to perceive its possibility,
to feel its blessings.
And, in those moments,
when we feel we are waiting for life to happen,
waiting for that perfect job
or that perfect home,
or for just everything to be right
so we can feel that yes, life has finally begun for us,
while we wait to be on the other side of the river,
we should realize that while we wait,
life is happening.
And the goal is to make sure that life isn't happening without us.

There really is no other choice.
For to choose the 2nd path –
the path chosen by the 10 tribal chiefs,
is to choose death:
“As for the men whom Moses sent to scout the land,
those who came back and
spread abuse about the land –
died of plague.
Of those men who had gone to scout the land,
only Joshua and Caleb survived.”

⁷ Torah Gems, edited by Aharon Yaakov Greenberg, p. 60-61.

There is only life, waiting to be lived.
Let us not delay.
Let's just live.
Aloh Na'aleh.
Surely we can do this.