



## When We Lose Composure: Torah Reflections on *Parashat Shelah* Numbers 13:1 – 15:41

In this week's Torah portion\*, *Shelah Leha*, the Israelites become paralyzed with anxiety about their future. It is an instructive episode because we, too, may sometimes feel confounded as we try to look ahead or make a decision in the face of fearful possibilities, crisis, or uncertainty.

It all starts with Moses appointing twelve scouts, upstanding individuals representing the different tribes of Israel, to spy out the Land of Canaan ahead of the Israelites' anticipated arrival and settlement there. After a 40-day tour, the scouts return with unexpected news. As is often the case, the report contained "good news and bad news"—and the twelve explorers presented different opinions and recommendations. The good news: "the land you sent us to flows with milk and honey." The bad news: "the people who live in the land are like giants, and the cities are fortified..." Two of the scouts remain hopeful and maintain "we are able [to overcome]." The other ten scouts give vent to their fears: "it is a land that devours its inhabitants... and [there] in our eyes we were like grasshoppers" (Numbers 13).

One can imagine the tension in the camp as the community reacts to these reports. The feelings of fear and uncertainty and sudden vulnerability could have easily led to a sense of betrayal and a crisis of faith—if not toward God, then at least toward the leadership of Moses and Aaron. Up until this incident, after all, the Israelites were ostensibly being led through the wilderness to the safety of a Promised Land. Even though all the scouts agree that the Land flows with milk and honey, the majority counsel against going there. Now what?!

We, the contemporary readers, know that the People Israel is meant to settle in Canaan—what later becomes the Land of Israel. As we read and picture the scene, we may want the community to be brave and hearken to the hopeful scouts—to remember God's promise. Despite the hopeful opinion of the two scouts, however, the shock and fear in response to the other part of the report prove overwhelming. The Israelite community is dispirited, and sides with the ten fearful scouts. The people "raised their voices and wept that night." Perhaps we can empathize. How often, after all, do we lose heart or dwell on our "worst case" imaginings, even as we yearn for something better?

The experience of an illness can feel like a strange land—a wilderness of sorts. Even with the promise of caring attention and improved health, we may feel small and powerless in that "wilderness". We may feel "like grasshoppers" before the "giants" of disease, powerful medications and machinery, and even hospital staff and protocols that loom large in the landscape of our experience. And then there are the sometimes excruciating uncertainties....

While we may wish for presence of mind and heart in our times of crisis, we cannot always achieve that. This is a part of the human condition. We may lament our loss of clarity, our paralysis, a straying from our sense of purpose. This is not what we desire,

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but the Torah repeatedly reminds us: this is a part of who we are. We can be forgiven for our lapses; make amends when we are able; find ways to accept and work with our situation.

Although the Israelites initially turn away from Canaan out of fear, God ultimately gives assurance of a time when the community will reach the Promised Land, engage in worship there, and live out the *mitzvot* that represent our efforts to live with a sense of the sacred, in accordance with the highest we know.

The Torah invites us to acknowledge that sometimes fear overtakes us and we are thrown off course, even as we are striving for good. How do we regain our calm, our perspective, our faith—how do we re-define or discover anew our strengths and aspirations; how do we re-connect with our heart and soul, with kindred spirits and community, with the Source of Life, during trying times of illness, crises, and ordeals? Each person has his or her own ways of doing this. Our tradition affirms that possibility and encourages us to pursue it. In the words of the prayerbook, “the gates are open” to us.

May we all find the strength and support, the faith and the perspective, the resolve or the sense of acceptance to help us move toward a greater sense of wholeness and inner calm and connectedness—that we may experience a Land flowing with the milk and honey of healing and *shalom*.

© Bay Area Jewish Healing Center, Rabbi Natan Fenner

*\*In Israel and in some Reform and Reconstructionist communities outside of Israel, parashat Shelah is read during the week leading up to June 13. In the Conservative and Orthodox communities—and in some of the other Liberal communities—of North America, this Torah portion is read during the week ending on June 20.*



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