

Shelach L'cha – 5771: Meeting the Future **Rabbi Micah Citrin**

If I were to ask you what you are going to do tomorrow, or where you are going to go, without hesitation you could tell me. The same would probably be true if I asked you about next week. But if I significantly changed the length of time and asked you about where you thought you would be in a year, or in five years your answer might change. Certainty might fade away. It is difficult to know exactly where we will be in the future, what we will be doing and what life's circumstances will hold. How often do we wish to know the future? How many of us wouldn't like to get a glimpse into what awaits us? Of course we know that this is not possible, but it does not dampen our concern for the hazy future on the horizon.

This week's Torah portion, *Shelach L'cha* is about the Israelites' desire to get a glimpse of what is to come, and how they respond to what potentially awaits them. Moses instructs 12 representatives, one distinguished leader from each tribe, to scout out the Promised Land. He wants to know what they might find when they enter. What is the country like? Are the people few or many, strong or weak? Is the land good? Are the towns fortified? The story is familiar to many of us. At the end of 40 days the spies return carrying the bounty of the land; grapes so large, so full of promise, that two men must haul them on a long pole. The spies also carry the burden of telling the Israelites that the people in the Promised Land are large and mighty, that they dwell in fortified towns. In their assessment, the Israelites cannot attack; the Canaanites are stronger. "We looked like grasshoppers to ourselves," the spies declare. And they conclude, "We must have in their eyes too." (Numbers 13:33) Only Caleb and Joshua have a different understanding. Yes, the challenges that stand in the way are formidable, but Caleb declares in one of the great verses of Torah, "Let us by all means go up, and gain possession of it, for we shall surely overcome it. - *Aloh na'aleh v'yarrashnu otah ki yachol nuchal la*" (Numbers 13:30). Caleb's encouragement fall on deaf ears as the Israelites begin cry out to return to Egypt, rather than meeting an unknown fate in the wilderness. On account of this episode, the Israelites will wander the desert for 40 years until the entire generation of the spies dies out. Only their children, the next generation will merit the Promised Land.

Why were the spies and their peers punished so harshly? The 19th century Hasidic master, Rabbi Menachem Mendl of Kotsk, takes exception at first. An uncompromising pursuer of truth, the Kotzker notes that spies did not lie; they reported what they saw. But, the Kotzker continues, the truth is more than not telling lies. It has to do with our perspective and our faith. The truth is not just what we see with our eyes, but what lies beneath the surface, discernable only with wisdom and understanding. Elaborating on Reb Menachem Mendl, contemporary Rabbis Lawrence Kushner and Kerry Olitzky identify the Promised Land as the Israelite's future. The spies accurately report what they saw, but it is when they offer their prediction of failure regarding what the future might hold that they stumble. Caleb and Joshua see the same hurdles on the horizon. They too do not know for certain what their encounter with the fortified cities and great people of Canaan will hold, but they embrace the possibility and the potential of the future. *Yachol Nuchal*— we can overcome it. To our rabbis' point, they have faith in God and faith in themselves to handle what comes their way.

Our lives are a series of Promised Lands and uncharted frontiers. What is over the next peak, around the next corner, or on the distant horizon is unknown to us. The potential and pitfalls are interwoven, and we will have to face both. Behind us is Egypt, it is where we have been, but we cannot go back. We live our lives entering what is to come. We all have dreams that we seek to accomplish, though we may not yet see the way to achieve that goal. There are jobs that we seek, relationships we look to build, personal learning and growth, and aspirations for our loved ones. And our Promised Lands are also strewn with daunting giants: failures, shortcomings, illness, personal tragedy, death, loss, and re-evaluating who we think we are in the face of these obstacles.

Shelach Lecha teaches us that we cannot look ahead and see the outcomes before they happen. We cannot control our future as much as we might like. But there is truth in facing the future with optimism, hope, and faith in God. For many of us, the idea of putting our trust in God to embrace an uncertain future is met with skepticism. It flies in the face of our sense of rationalism. Perhaps we balk when we see the devoted evangelical Christian declare their trust in God as they confront uncertainty or tragedy. Yet, perhaps we dismiss this attitude too quickly. *Shelch Lecha* challenges us to declare our faith and our hope, too. If we meet this challenge we need not check our minds or sense of reason at the door, but we might find a larger truth as we intuit hope from our faith. Of a grounded, mature hope the great Czech statesman Vaclav Havel writes:

“Hope is a state of mind, not of the world . . . Either we have hope or we don't; it is a dimension of the soul, and it's not essentially dependent on some particular observation of the world or estimate of the situation. Hope is not prognostication. It is an orientation of the spirit, and orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons . . .

Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously heading for success, but rather an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed. The more propitious the situation in which we demonstrate hope, the deeper the hope is.”

Caleb and Joshua become our models for approaching the Promised Lands that lie ahead. They model Jewish hope based in a faith of the saving presence of God no matter how daunting the future. Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan, father of Reconstructionist Judaism called God “the power that makes for salvation”. This power resides in us and beyond us. It is the well-spring of fortitude on which we draw when we search for the strength, perspective, and truth to take our next steps; so that as we encounter our future we might respond *yachol nuchal* – we surely can and we will.