



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Shlach 5774

By Rabbi Wendi Geffen

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You likely know that our ancestors wandered the wilderness for 40 years until they entered the Promised Land. You may find it surprising, though, that the ancient Israelites actually arrived at the border of the Land of Israel only two years after the Exodus. The other 38 years of wandering weren't a long journey to the land; they were the consequence of ill-fated events that took place during *Parashat Shlach*.

The *parashah* records that first arrival and the preparations to enter the land. In anticipation of moving forward, Moses directs twelve tribal leaders to scout and assess the land, its inhabitants and cities. The scouts embark, evaluate and gather fruit as “proof” of the quality of the land. They return and report on the land’s goodness—but they also warn of its heavy fortification and intimidating residents. With their reflection that the Israelites must have looked like grasshoppers in the eyes of the land’s giant inhabitants, the scouts send the entire Israelite population into fear-fueled panic. Despite the desperate pleas of Joshua and Caleb not to be deterred from their goal, the people beg to return to Egypt. Enraged by the sinfulness of the ten spies, God seals the fate of their entire faithless generation: none of them, save for Joshua and Caleb, would ever enter the Promised Land.¹

Although the Torah never defines the exact sin of the scouts, the 18th-century Chasidic master Rabbi Yisrael ben Eliezer, the Baal Shem Tov (or BeShT), offers his own analysis. The BeShT identifies a two-fold problem: the scouts had a skewed perception of the land and a warped sense of its inhabitants. While the Torah offers a substantial description of the bountiful nature of the land’s produce, noting that a single cluster of grapes proved so abundant that “it had to be borne on a carrying frame by two of [the scouts],”² the scouts describe the fruit of the land in simple, non-descript terms, focusing instead on the intimidating nature of the people who sowed these giant crops.

The BeShT cites Moses’ instruction to the scouts to “*hitchazaktem*—strengthen yourselves” before taking a sample of the land’s fruit.³ The BeShT interprets that Moses hoped that in seeing the fruit of the land, the scouts would recognize that the hard work would have a worthwhile payoff, which would inspire them to shore themselves up for the labor and patience required in achieving the long-term goal of living in the land and cultivating its produce. This explains why the Torah’s description of the land emphasizes the quality of the terrain and the beautiful crops: the Torah had the end game in mind. If the scouts had understood this as well, they would have reported back to the people that the mission to conquer the land would be hard, but ultimately worth it in the end, as evidenced by the grapes they brought back.

But instead, the scouts focused on the formidable size and strength of their opponents. Rather than drawing strength for the important work ahead they turned away, seeing the task as too daunting and ultimately not worth either the risk or the reward. Although the scouts’ desire for immediate results is understandable, their approach was not realistic and proved destructive—setting them back for decades of additional wandering.

¹ Numbers 13:1-14:38.

² Number 13:23.

³ Numbers 13:20.

We, too, are susceptible to this kind of thinking—especially in our work to promote global social justice. So often, when we learn of an injustice, we are passionate about fighting against it. But when we come to understand that truly addressing the issue demands extensive and expansive work, we often turn away. Take, for example, the terrorist group Boko Haram’s kidnapping of hundreds of Nigerian school girls in mid-April. Abuzz in the media for about a week and half, the hashtag #bringbackourgirls tantalized many of us with its false promise of actually accomplishing something. As the weeks passed, the media buzz died down and the “hashtag activists” quieted, but the students remained missing and Boko Haram’s terrorist activities, which existed long before the kidnapping, continued.

Sadly, most of us are so easily daunted by the magnitude of injustice in our world that we quickly throw up our hands: the powers of injustice are giants in our midst. Who are we, so small and insignificant, to even attempt to conquer them? It would be great to see an end to global poverty and a world where every person’s human rights were upheld, but the challenges far outweigh the potential long-term rewards. Like the spies, we list the obstacles one after another, forgetting to imagine the grandeur and splendor of what a redeemed world could look like.

The current push to pass the International Violence Against Women Act (IVAWA) in Congress demonstrates the importance of dedication and resilience if we seek to create systemic change. IVAWA has been introduced three times—first in 2007-2008, again in 2010, and now in 2013. While it has yet to be passed into law, each time that it has been introduced it has gained more co-sponsors and more traction. If passed this year, IVAWA has the potential to be a real game changer for the status of women and girls throughout the Global South, as it will enable the U.S. to significantly influence the global women’s rights agenda. But this will only happen if we remain resilient, focused and continue to take action, and not be deterred by obstacles that stand in our way.

The Baal Shem Tov’s insight into *Parashat Shlach* proves an important reminder for anyone who calls him or herself an activist: there is no “reaping the fruits of our labor” without putting in the hard work and sticking with it for the long haul. Let this message sustain us as we continue our efforts to cultivate justice and freedom throughout the world.

For more information on how you can join the effort to pass IVAWA, sign on AJWS’ We Believe campaign by clicking [here](#).



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