



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Shlach 5772

By Sigal Samuel

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When God tells Moses in *Parshat Shlach*, “Send for yourself men to spy out the land of Canaan,”¹ it sounds like the start of an exciting adventure. But what seems exhilarating soon becomes chilling—then downright devastating. Of the 12 men who are sent to scout the land, 10 return with a negative report: The people are fierce, the cities are fortified and the land itself “devours its inhabitants.”² Discouraged, the Israelites give up on entering Canaan, and God punishes them for their pessimism by condemning the entire generation to wander the desert for 40 years. Their children will live to see the Promised Land, but they will die before ever laying eyes on it.³

According to the *Kli Yakar*, a 16th-century commentator, this national tragedy could have been averted had Moses heeded the subtle warning in God’s command. Amazingly, the commentator interprets God’s words, “Send for yourself men,” to mean that Moses should send men if that’s what *he* wants to do; however, in God’s opinion, Moses would do better to send women spies.⁴

The *Kli Yakar*’s reasoning is simple: whereas the male Israelites show a lack of investment in the land, the female Israelites show great love for it. While the men go so far as to suggest a return to Egypt,⁵ women, like Tzafchad’s daughters, fight tooth and nail for their right to inherit land in Canaan.⁶ Had Moses sent female spies, the *Kli Yakar* suggests, they would have seen the same terrifying sights as their male counterparts; but, driven by their love for the land, they would have focused on long-term solutions instead of becoming discouraged in the face of difficulty.

The *Kli Yakar*’s choice of example suggests that Israelite women would have made better spies because of their ability to create and implement future-oriented plans, even though carrying out such plans meant facing obstacles in the present. When Tzafchad’s daughters dared to challenge Moses and fight for their right to inherit land in Canaan, they were fighting for a right they would not get to exercise for some time. Looking beyond their present circumstances, these women acted with future generations in mind.

The *Kli Yakar*’s reading—fascinating in its own right—is especially interesting in light of the claim, on the part of many contemporary experts, that the best way to reduce poverty in developing countries is to invest in women. Study after study has shown that, when women control the family budget, they are more likely than men to invest in education, health care and food for their children.⁷ Because women in developing countries tend to spend money on things that pay off in the long term, they increase the intergenerational return on investments. In other words, betting on women to reduce poverty is not only good for gender equality; it is also good business sense.

¹ Numbers 13:2.

² Numbers 13:27-33.

³ Numbers 14:26-35.

⁴ *Kli Yakar* on Numbers 13:2.

⁵ Numbers 14:4.

⁶ Numbers 27:1-11. That this occurs *after* the spies are dispatched is explained by the popular rabbinic notion that God sees the future and counsels Moses accordingly.

⁷ Leah Witcher Jackson, “Educate the Women and You Change the World,” *Forum on Public Policy* 2009.

<http://forumonpublicpolicy.com/summer09/archivesummer09/jackson.pdf>

Women’s tendency to invest in education, for example, has vast ramifications in a world where one extra year of schooling increases a child’s future earnings by 10 percent.⁸ Because people who earn more tend to contribute to stronger economies and raise healthier families, women’s willingness to invest in education impacts income and welfare at a national level.

Women have also proven to be better stewards of land when it comes to small-scale farming—a crucial fact, given the prevalence of food shortages in many developing countries. When long-term agricultural training and loans are offered to them, women typically make judicious use of both. In fact, the World Economic Forum has found that giving female farmers in Kenya the same level of agricultural assistance as men can increase yields by over 20 percent.⁹

Of course, none of this is meant to indicate that men aren’t also capable of charting a successful course toward development. They, too, certainly possess the skills to positively impact the income and welfare of developing nations. But studies show that women in these contexts tend to do so more strategically; and yet, opportunities on par with those available to their male counterparts have more often been withheld from them.

The Kli Yakar’s reading should remind us that, like the Israelite women, the women of today’s world show a great aptitude for creating and implementing the future-oriented plans their nations need—when they are given equal opportunity to do so. For this reason, World Bank managing director Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala explains: “Investing in women is smart economics.”¹⁰ If ever we needed extra motivation to increase our level of support to organizations that empower women in developing nations, this is it. After all, while the women we invest in now may not see all the fruits of their labor, their children will enter the Promised Land their mothers worked to attain.



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⁸ “Educate and Empower,” *Global Campaign for Education* May 2012. http://www.aft.org/pdfs/international/fs_gceeducategirls.pdf

⁹ “Women and Anti-Poverty Efforts in Developing Countries,” *World Savvy Monitor* May 2009.

http://worldsavvy.org/monitor/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=566&Itemid=1013

¹⁰ “Adolescent Girls in Focus at the World Economic Forum,” *The World Bank*, Accessed June 2012. <http://go.worldbank.org/QWPUUOPVY0>

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