



Torah from JTS

Parashat Shelah Lekha 5774 / 2014

some of the fruit of the land” (Num. 13:18–20). Unfortunately, we know well that the mission goes awry as the majority of the scouts despair of the chance of conquest. And a grammatical inconsistency seems to give us a clue as to the unfortunate unfolding of events. Numbers 13:22 states, referring to the scouts, that they “went up to the Negev,” using the plural of the verb (*vaya’alu*); however, it continues by stating, “it/he came to Hebron,” employing the singular (*vayavo*). How may we understand this discrepancy, and what does it teach us?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explains,

The singular *vayavo* is striking. According to *Sotah 34b*, it refers to Caleb, who journeyed there to pray on the grave of the forefathers for strength to stand up against the intentions of his colleagues. Confirmation can be found in Deuteronomy 1:36, where it says, “and to him will I give the land upon which he has walked,” and in fact Caleb did get Hebron . . . But in any case, there is nothing at all in the context of our verse to make Caleb or any other individual, the subject of *vayavo* . . . We would therefore actually believe that *vayavo* refers to the whole company. It is put in the singular to indicate that up to Hebron they came “as one man” in complete unison in feelings and unanimity of mind and purpose. They went up from the south and came in unison to Hebron. But there they saw the descendants of giants . . . and this brought about the wavering alteration in their courage and resolutions. It is not impossible to connect this way of thinking with that argued in *Sotah*. Until Hebron the predominating influence of Caleb kept them all in the same mood of courage, determination and faith. In Hebron, Caleb felt the beginning of the difference between himself and the others. (*Commentary on Numbers*, 201–202)

Hirsch’s commentary is masterful in attempting to resolve *peshat* (literal understanding) and *midrash* (homiletical interpretation). While Hirsch does well to allude to the talmudic midrash claiming that *vayavo* refers to Caleb, he notes that there is nothing in the literal sense of the verse that should lead us to such an understanding. Rather, he sees the use of the singular as reflecting the emotional state of the scouts. They set out to Hebron to accomplish their mission with a unified sense of purpose. Regrettably, their unity degenerates into chaos as their spirits are dampened by what they uncover. Caleb however proves to be of another mindset—and he succeeds in separating himself from communal despair. Hirsch poetically resolves the textual conflict by arguing that the transition from plural to singular, and back to plural represents a liminal moment. While they arrive in Hebron of one heart, they leave disheartened, heading in many directions. Only Caleb can envision a different, more hopeful scenario. May we, like Caleb, strive to be unified with our community—but when the challenge arises, may each of us find the gumption within us to be the lone dissenting and rational voice. It is often such a heroic voice that redeems an entire nation.

The publication and distribution of A Taste of Torah are made possible by a generous grant from Sam and Marilee Susi.

PARASHAH COMMENTARY

By Dr. Michal Raucher, Adjunct Assistant Professor of Jewish Thought and Director of the MA Program in Jewish Ethics, JTS

The Clothes Make the (Wo)man

During graduation season, I try to learn everything there is to know about academic dress. In many commencement ceremonies, faculty members wear gowns and hoods that, though ostensibly very similar, importantly distinguish one from the other. A blue and black gown could indicate a graduate of Columbia University or Case Western Reserve University (you have to be able to distinguish “Columbia blue” from other blues to see the difference). A hood with red trim could symbolize a degree in Forestry, Journalism, or Theology, also depending on the shade of red. Then there are those robes that stand out so significantly that they are instantly identifiable, such as McGill University’s bright red and gold robe, which ties delicately in the front.

I might have a better handle on these details if I actually saw people in their gowns on a more regular basis. In fact, in the 12th and 13th centuries, when academic regalia was first instituted in European universities, students and faculty wore their gowns, hoods, and later caps, every day. The gowns and hoods probably kept scholars warm in the unheated buildings. I often think about what it would be like to wear these gowns every day. Would it intimidate students if professors wore their accreditation “on their sleeves”? Might it equalize students, who would all be wearing the same uniform? If everyone in the classroom wore academic dress, could it introduce a level of formality that is lost when students enter an 8:00 a.m. class in their pajamas? Do these gowns make us more similar or highlight our differences?

When I wore my doctoral gown for the first time, admiring the three velvet stripes on the sleeves and the colors of my hood, I thought I would want to wear it all the time. It is a public display of all the hard work I have done, the things I have learned, where I have come from, and what my future might hold. As it turns out, however, the gown gets very hot, and the hood never seems to stay in place. Furthermore, instead of feeling empowered by flaunting my hard work, I feel dwarfed in the oversized garment, and like a bit of an imposter with all its accoutrements.

The day I picked out my tallit, I experienced a similar feeling. I was 12

years old, and my mother and I were at a Jewish art festival. A tallit-maker set up her stand, and my mom told me how much she wanted me to have a unique tallit that I really loved. Most of the tallitot I had ever seen were white with black or blue stripes. Some were big, some small, but most were generic and marketed toward men. Then there was a smaller market (and still is) of explicitly women's tallitot—they drape like a shawl over one's shoulders, in delicate fabrics like lace and silk. Instead, I wanted a “man's tallit” that I could wear as a young woman. I insisted, therefore, that I get a big tallit so that I could fold it over my shoulders. It was the early 1990s, so I picked something out that was pink and turquoise, not colors I would have chosen today. I decided to forego the cookie-cutter options for the *'atara* (lit., the crown), the stretch of fabric at the neckpiece of the tallit. Against a backdrop of the Jerusalem skyline, my *'atara* includes my favorite quote: “*Veshavti beveit Adonai le'orekh yamim*” (And you shall dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of your life). On the corners that hold the tzitzit, we embroidered the names of my female ancestors. So when I put that tallit on for the first time the day I became a bat mitzvah, I was wrapped in my female lineage. The weight of the message sometimes still overwhelms me, just like my doctoral gown: yes, you earned this, but you have a great responsibility to carry on what others have started. For a few years, every time I wore that tallit, I remembered those responsibilities. When I started wearing my tallit again after the recent *teshuvah* from the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards on women's obligation to wear tzitzit, I felt the weight of that responsibility again.

At the very end of this week's parashah, Shelah Lekha, B'nai Yisrael are commanded to make tzitzit (fringes) on the corners of their garments. This passage (Num. 15: 37–41) will sound familiar to you as the third paragraph of the Shema'. Commentators explain that the fringes were meant as a visual aid to the Israelites. “It shall be until you for a fringe, that ye may look upon it, and remember all the commandments of the Lord, and keep them” (v. 39). This passage follows the notorious pericope of stoning a man who was caught desecrating the Sabbath, and as a result, Nahmanides, for one, cites this story as the reason people need tzitzit. Remembering all the commandments, specifically those related to Shabbat, necessitates a garment that serves as a reminder. Although not referencing the stoning specifically, Ibn Ezra also latches onto the idea that the tzitzit should be a reminder to follow commandments. He maintains that this garment should not just be worn during prayer but all day, every day. He writes, “In my opinion, however, it is more important to wear the fringes during the rest of the day than it is during prayer. One must observe God's commandments all day, and during prayer is the least likely time for a transgression.” Nahmanides and Ibn Ezra understand that this garment is supposed to change the way you act. It is supposed to help you embody a better character.

Like other Jewish rituals that have been personalized and amended to re-

flect the diverse population of followers (from brit bat ceremonies to adult b'nai mitzvah ceremonies), the creative designing of tallitot makes an important statement about how we as Jews appropriate mitzvot. The mitzvah of tzitzit as outlined in our parashah is intended to create a uniform code of action, to remind people to keep a very particular list of commandments. My tallit, in addition to serving that more traditional purpose, also reminds me of the importance of being a woman who wears a tallit. It reminds me that I come from a strong lineage of Jewish women that I have an equally strong obligation to respect.

Can our clothing actually make us better people? Better Jews? Foucault, Bourdieu, and other scholars argue that one's body is the locus for his or her self-formation. In other words, a person experiences the world with his or her body, and develops an identity that is related to it. This means that changes in one's body will result in a changing sense of self and a new relationship with others. Similarly, wearing a significantly different outfit can effect these kinds of changes. Putting on your best suit and polished shoes may make you feel more prepared for an important meeting. And your favorite sweatpants might instantly relax you after a stressful day. So maybe it's not so hard to believe that some clothing can remind us to act in a certain way, or to embody a persona slightly different from normal. Additionally, clothing distinguishes us from one another. It highlights individuality so that, even in the face of uniformity, we acknowledge our differences.

Wearing my tallit today, I find I am transformed during davening. I belong there, and I have the garment to prove it; furthermore, the garment itself changes my attitude. I am generally more present, but I am specifically more focused on what is going on in the sanctuary. Sometimes it provides much-needed warmth in an overly air conditioned sanctuary, but mostly it serves as a reminder—of where I came from, where I'm going, and how I must act while on that journey.

The publication and distribution of the JTS Commentary are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee and Harold (z"l) Hassenfeld.

A TASTE OF TORAH

By Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, Director of Israel Programs, The Rabbinical School, JTS

Unity and Leadership

At the very beginning of this week's parashah, Moses organizes a mission to scout out the land of Canaan. As the Israelites stand on the verge of dispossessing the Canaanite nations, God commands Moses to reconnoiter the territory through the agency of 12 men representing each of the tribes. They are given specific instructions: “Go up there in to the Negev and into the hill country, and see what kind of country it is. Are the people who dwell in it strong or weak, few or many? Is the country in which they dwell good or bad? Are the towns they live in open or fortified? Is the soil rich or poor? Is it wooded or not? And take pains to bring back