

Speaking of Text

A WEEKLY EXPLORATION OF THE JEWISH BOOKSHELF



Stars that Shine by Their Own Light

Dr. Aryeh Wineman, JTS Alumnus (RS '59)

Letters of Light: Passages from Ma'or va-shemesh by Aryeh Wineman

Letters of Light consists of over ninety excerpts translated from *Ma'or va-shemesh*, a classic Hasidic collection of homilies on the Torah-readings of the year composed by Kalonymus Kalman Epstein of Krakow, who died just short of two centuries ago. While written in a world very different from our own, the work, in some respects, remarkably addresses our own time and the quest for greater depth and spirituality that we witness in many quarters today.

In addition to the innovative quality of the preacher's interpretation of the Torah-text, *Ma'or va-shemesh* points to a profound innerness Epstein claimed to find in the Torah as it speaks to the deepest level of a person's psyche. This remarkable preacher and commentator was attuned to the overtones and allusions in the Torah-text. He viewed its more conventional reading as a garment covering the Torah's deeper character and considered the Torah's very letters as reflecting a light that transcends the more limited meaning of the words they comprise.

The teacher and preacher (and community organizer) in Krakow viewed the role both of community and of the individual in a way that might well speak to our contemporary reality. He recognized, for example, that a thousand people can pray together in a huge hall and yet the prayer of each person is different. The homilist's ear perceived the uniqueness of every person and the consequential uniqueness of each person's conception of God, which reflects the deepest aspect of the self. He envisioned a true community within which each member is like a star "that shines by its own light."

His is a voice from the past that, in some significant respects, resonates with our own, recognizing and accommodating the demands both of community and of our own soulfulness.

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Shelah Lekha 5778

שלח-לך תשע"ח



What Did the Spies Learn About the Land (Before They Even Went There)?

Dr. Alex Sinclair, Director of Programs in Israel Education, Adjunct Assistant Professor of Jewish Education, JTS

A Jewish leader is talking to a group of Diaspora Jews who are about to visit Israel. "Make sure you visit all over," he says. "Find out what it's like there. What are the people like? Is the food good? And when you come back, can you bring me a souvenir?"

Of course, I'm referring to Numbers 13:17–20. Yes, Shelah Lekha is the first example of Israel education in Jewish history. Thinking of this story as some kind of archetypal case study for Israel education, what can we learn? What can the story teach us about the dilemmas we face in talking about Israel today?

Firstly, Moses's instructions to the spies display some of the same problems that we sometimes find in contemporary Israel education. The questions he asks are pretty basic: just the surface facts. "How many people? What style of fortifications? Are there trees?" Unfortunately, we often see the same flaws in contemporary iterations of Israel education: for many teachers, the default educational move is to teach Israel's geography and history from a facts-centric perspective. We thrust a weird triangle shape (or, if we're left-wing, a shoe-with-heel shape) under our students' noses, and ask them to mark Haifa, Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and Eilat (always the easiest one). If we're really creative, we draw this map really big and put it on the floor. But Israel remains an abstract, academic, artificial subject, removed from children's real life experiences as young American Jews. To borrow the terms of the philosopher of Jewish education Michael Rosenak (*z"l*), we teach "about" Israel, creating a "secondary relationship": "one can *instruct* about a tradition in a secondary relationship, but one cannot *teach* it; one cannot educate toward commitment to it" (*Commandments and Concerns*, 106, italics in original).

What's the result of this kind of presentation of Israel? The spies all seem to gain a great deal of knowledge. They have the answers to Moses's questions. They would score highly on a quiz *about* Israel. But that's not enough. The spies teach us that knowledge alone doesn't create commitment. The first major challenge when teaching about Israel is to spark in our students the *motivation to seek* knowledge.

A second core question revolves around when to introduce children to the more difficult, frustrating, and perhaps alienating aspects of modern Israel. Should we adopt a "love first" approach in which students are only exposed to these complex issues when (or if?) they are already committed to Israel? Or should we adopt a more holistic approach, in which from day one we share with children, in developmentally appropriate ways, the flaws and failures of Israel along with its wonders and beauties, hoping to engender in students a love of and commitment to Israel that is robust enough to include critique about its problems?

Rashi offers a delightful insight on verse 17 that might be applied to this perennial question. Sensitive reader of the text that he is, he picks up on the differences between what biblical critics now refer to as the J and E sources that have been woven together here. J has the spies going only into the area around Hebron and the hills of Judah, whereas E has them going throughout Northern Israel too. Rashi (who, of course, sees the text as a unified whole) wonders why in verse 17 it suggests to start with the Negev (in other words, the Southern part of Judah, according to Jacob Milgrom). Rashi's answer, quoting from Midrash Tanhuma, is that God is like a wise merchant: first he shows a prospective purchaser the inferior goods, then the best stuff. This might be too extreme an approach for us, but perhaps Rashi can reassure us that showing "inferior goods" *along with* "the best stuff" can instill a Caleb-like complex commitment to Israel. (The flaw in this argument, of course, is that God's educational success rate in Shelah Lekha is only 17 percent, or 2 in 12! Perhaps this approach isn't for everyone . . .)

Finally, in verses 25–33, we get a glimpse of a third major challenge that we face when discussing Israel. Two different people look at the same facts, the same empirical situation, the same set of events, and interpret them not just differently, but wildly differently: so differently that each sees the other's position as disastrous for the future of the entire Jewish people. The

difference between Caleb's position and the rest of the spies' position is not nuance; it is absolute. It's a zero-sum game.

So too, much contemporary teaching about Israel is plagued with zero-sumness, the same kind of zero-sumness that has infected much of our contemporary political lives. In today's polarized discourse, we no longer have different opinions, or contrasting arguments, or diverse positions; we have different facts. Fake news. Post-truth era. Facts in one bubble that are fiction in the other. You're either Caleb or the spies.

Israel education continues to deal with high stakes situations for the Jewish people, and too often we respond to positions that we don't agree with by resorting to the kind of polarized and shrill discourse that we see in Numbers 14:1–4. You're leading us to disaster, the Israelites cry, to "fall by the sword." Here, the Torah doesn't offer us a satisfactory resolution, but a later Jewish tradition, recorded in Targum Jonathan, suggests that this event took place on Tishah Be'av. The association of this archetypal zero-sum situation with the archetypal day of Jewish tragedy offers us a cautionary tale. When we are presenting Israel and we find ourselves in situations where it's either "Caleb or the spies," with each side seeing the other as disastrous and traitorous, it behooves us to pull each side back from the brink and try to create open, respectful, thoughtful dialogue about the issues that might let us avoid 40 more years of wilderness.

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