

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



Do Not Enter

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This week's parashah includes the story of the scouting of the Promised Land. My photograph *Do Not Enter* can be seen as a modern representation of what the scouts saw: the beauty and bounty of the Land along with the dangers some were reluctant to face. The female figure can be seen as the embodiment of the Land's fertility, while the foreboding backdrop of a New York City alleyway and large guard dog represent the strength and ferocity of the people living there. That the photo is in black and white encourages the viewer not to be distracted by other elements and to focus on the power and presence of the figures.

The image is intimidating, and if we interpret it as a representation of the Land the scouts saw, it is clear how the faithless would be willing to abandon their pursuits. However, those that have faith, like Caleb and Joshua, would learn that the truth behind this image may be more hospitable than it seems: the alley

where this portrait was taken was on a sunny, friendly street in SoHo and the frightening dog was a skittish Great Dane puppy who wanted nothing more than to curl up at his owner's feet and nap. To me, the first portion of this week's parashah speaks to having true faith and willingness to stand up to your fears—they might not be all they seem!

This artwork was on display at JTS in the 2016 Corridors exhibition, part of JTS's Artist-in-Residence program.

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TORAH FROM JTS



Shelah Lekha 5779

שלח-לך תשע"ט



The Power of One

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This week's parashah, Shelah Lekha, opens with the famous episode of twelve scouts going on a reconnaissance mission to the land of Israel. As most of us know the story, upon their return, ten of them recommend returning to Egypt, whereas just two, Joshua and Caleb, encourage the Israelites to continue their journey to the Promised Land. When we look at the verses of chapter 13, we discover that that is not exactly what they say.

According to Num. 13:27–28, when the scouts returned from their trip, they said to Moshe: “[W]e came to the land you sent us to. It does indeed flow with milk and honey. However, the people who inhabit the country are powerful.” The Torah continues and says that Caleb hushed the people before Moses, saying, “Let us by all means go up” (v. 30). The other (eleven) scouts refused to be persuaded by Caleb and responded, “We cannot attack that people for it is stronger than we” (v. 31). The outcome is clear: the scouts praise the Land of Israel but fear its people. They will not press forward.

The surprising feature of these verses is that, according to them, it is Caleb alone who stands up to the crowd of nay-sayers. But weren't most of us taught in Hebrew school that it was both Joshua and Caleb who stood up to the other ten? What are we to make of this inconsistency?

Let's turn to the commentary on these verses in the Tosefta, a collection parallel to the Mishnah:

“We came to the land you sent us to,” said Joshua (v. 27).

“באנו אל הארץ אשר
שלחתנו” אמר יהושע

Caleb said, “Let us by all means go up, and we shall gain possession of it” (v. 30).

כלב אמר “עלה נעלה
וירשנו אתה”

The scouts said, “However, the people who inhabit the country are powerful” (v. 28).

מרגלים אמרו “אפס כי עז
העם היושב בארץ”

Three statements, one next to the other: the one who said this did not say that, and the one who said that did not say this (*Sotah* 9:2).

שלשה דברים זה בצד זה,
מי שאמר זה לא אמר זה,
ומי שאמר זה לא אמר זה.

The Rabbis of the Tosefta present their own understanding of these verses. They claim that it was not the eleven scouts who said, “we came to the land you sent us to” (v. 27), but Joshua alone who said those words. And it was the other ten scouts, not including Caleb, who went on to say, “However, the people there are powerful” (v. 28). To which Caleb responded, “Let us by all means go up, and we shall gain possession of it” (v. 30). According to this reading, not one but two scouts—Caleb and also Joshua—encouraged the people to continue the journey and overcome the obstacles.

It is evident that the Rabbis are not interpreting the text according to the simple meaning of the words. They claim that there are three speakers—Caleb, the people, and Joshua—and not just two, as the verses suggest. Why do they introduce Joshua into a text that makes absolutely no mention of him? Why do they allow him to act as bravely as Caleb?

To arrive at an answer, let’s read the continuation of the episode in chapter 14. After the people refuse to go up to the Land, both Caleb and Joshua try to quell the rebellion against Moshe (v. 6). They fail. God then says that whereas the rest of the Exodus generation will die in the desert, Caleb alone will survive and enter the Land because “he was imbued with a different spirit and remained loyal to Me (v. 24).

Note that the verse does not mention that Joshua too will survive. Later in the chapter, however, God does say that Joshua, too, will enter the Land (v. 30). In addition, a verse in Deuteronomy (1:36) again says that God will allow only Caleb of the Exodus generation to reach the Promised Land. We thus see that three verses—Num. 13:30 and 14:24 and Deut. 1:36—speak of Caleb alone resisting the scouts’ report and surviving the forty-year trek in the desert. The reason that he alone is mentioned is that only he took on all eleven scouts and tried to get them to change their minds.

Joshua did not join him in that noble attempt. What we learned as children—that both Joshua and Caleb opposed the other ten scouts—is not the literal meaning of the verses.

The Rabbis of the Tosefta wanted to shine a positive light on Moshe’s future successor. Joshua too, they held, must have believed that the people could triumph over the Land’s giant inhabitants. And so they interpolated Joshua into the story. It is also likely that the Rabbis wanted to make the episodes of chapters 13 and 14 align with each other. Since Joshua joined Caleb in trying to stop the rebellion in chapter 14, the Rabbis reasoned that he must have done the same in chapter 13, even though the Torah does not say so. They thus portray Joshua, like Caleb, as someone with great faith in God and no fear of the people.

To my mind, there is a downside to the Rabbis’ addition of Joshua to chapter 13: the aggrandizement of Joshua leads to the diminution of Caleb. He becomes merely a sidekick of Joshua, rather than the hero the verses suggest that he is. (Contemporary Bible scholars, in trying to solve the problem of the silent Joshua in chapter 13, claim that chapters 13 and 14 are two versions of the same story—a not uncommon occurrence in the Bible—with one told from Caleb’s perspective [chapter 13] and the other from Joshua’s [chapter 14]. They view chapter 13 as the more reliable version, as I have been suggesting here.)

Were it not for the Tosefta, I don’t think I would have noticed the absence of Joshua in Numbers 13. Like so many others, I have always read that chapter through the eyes of the Rabbis. But by looking carefully at the verses themselves, I realized that the plain sense meaning of the Torah is that Caleb understood that the other scouts were misguided, foresaw the dire consequences of their stance, and bravely tried to change their minds. True he did not succeed. But he made a valiant attempt. I understand the quandary in which the Rabbis found themselves. I sympathize with their reading Joshua into the text of chapter 13. But for me the challenge is to return Caleb to his rightful place in Jewish history, for he grasped the “power of one.” No longer should he be an unsung hero, nor should the importance of standing up for what is right, even if you must do so alone, be forgotten.

The current popularity of the name Caleb, along with the fact that she has a grandson by that name, led Rabbi Hauptman to write this column.

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