

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 2016 in the Corridors exhibition, part of JTS's Artist-in-Residence program.

To view the image in high-definition, visit www.jtsa.edu/do-not-enter

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TORAH FROM JTS



Shelah Lekha 5780

שלח-לך תש"ף



What True Leadership Demands

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This is truly a fateful parashah. For it is in this week's Torah reading that we learn why Israel is condemned to wander in the wilderness for forty years before entering the Promised Land. The details of the story are straightforward: Moses chooses twelve representatives, one from each of the tribes, to scout the land that the people are about to enter. The spies are given a very specific assignment: *Come back with facts—is this a good land? Are the peoples who live there strong or weak? What is the produce of this land like?* (Num. 13:17-20) The spies set out, scout the Land, and return with their report: indeed the Land is good, but the people who live there are too powerful to conquer. Only Joshua and Caleb dissent from the report. Caleb says, "Let us go up and . . . we shall surely overcome it." (v.30) But the other ten disagree—the people who live there are "stronger than we." (v.31) The Israelites break into cries and complaints and ask to return to Egypt. (14:1-4) And these complaints lead to the punishment that the current generation must die off during the next forty years so that a fresh start can be made when entering Canaan. Of the older generation only Joshua and Caleb will have that privilege. (14:22-24)

From a literary point of view Shelah Lekha is anything but a simple story. Perhaps the most prominent question the story raises is: Who is to blame for the disastrous consequences of the reconnaissance mission? On the surface it appears that the failure of nerve evidenced by ten of the twelve scouts directly causes the people's cowardly reaction. After listening to the scouts, the people wail that it would have been better to have died in Egypt than to "die by the sword" (14:3) now. By those words, they choose to

forget the 400 years of oppression in Egypt and God's miraculous delivery of them from slavery. They do not recognize God's saving hand or understand that the power that could split the Sea of Reeds could also help them defeat the inhabitants of Canaan.

But perhaps the blame is not only with the scouts or with the people. After all, Moses sends the scouts on their mission and asks them to evaluate the situation from a military point of view. The list of his questions leads to their pessimistic assessment of the situation. Even more troubling is the fact that the origin of the scouts' mission was through God's command. The parashah begins with God saying to Moses, "Send men to scout out the Land of Canaan . . ." (13:2) Isn't it that command from on high that sets this whole tale down its tragic path? Traditional commentators were well aware of this possible interpretation and aimed to undercut such a reading. Rashi, for example, picks up on the two-word Hebrew command "*shelah lekha*" (in which the second word "you" can be viewed as superfluous) and understands it, midrashically, as "for yourself": "Do this for yourself," Rashi says, "I am not commanding you to do it, but if you want to, send them." Midrash Tanhuma (*Shelah* 1) takes it even a step further stating that God actually *didn't* want Moses to send out the spies—an interpretation that contradicts the plain meaning of the opening words of our parashah!

The Bible itself reinterprets the mission. In Deuteronomy Moses recounts the story of the twelve scouts and says that the people came and asked him to designate people to spy out the Land. God's command does not even appear.

But no matter who is to blame for the impetus for the mission, we are left to ask, what exactly did the spies do wrong? What was it about their report that led to God's disapproval? Were they lying? And if they weren't, why should they be punished for simply reporting what they saw?

I suggest that the spies failed not by misrepresenting what they had seen in the Land but rather, they failed in more subtle ways. First, they didn't take into account the social impact of their words. Their report brought despair and a virtual rebellion into the Israelite camp. While each of the spies was a "chieftain among them" (13:2)—they misunderstood the

essence of leadership and proved themselves unworthy of the trust Moses had placed in them. To be a true leader one has to understand who your followers are and what support they need from you.

And secondly, the spies failed not by misstating the truth about the Land, but by their own interpretation of what they had discovered. True, the nations of Canaan were powerful. But the self-perception of the scouts was what brought about their downfall. Caleb announced that they would succeed against the inhabitants; the others proclaimed that they would fail. Surely both Caleb and the ten doubters had scouted the same land, seen the same things. But the doubters stated, "all the people that we saw . . . are men of great size . . . and we looked like grasshoppers to ourselves, and so we must have looked to them." (13:33) This is the most telling line of all. *In their own eyes* the Israelite spies were weak. It was a failure of their own self-understanding, not the reality of the situation that was the problem.

Interestingly enough, the Torah in verses 13:21–24 never tells us what the spies actually saw. We only learn what happened from the participants themselves. Truth, the Torah suggests, is the perception of reality that each individual brings. If, as the midrash *Pesikta deRav Kahana* tells us, each person at Sinai received the revelation in his or her own individual and appropriate way, what we have in this week's parashah is the terrifying other side of that midrash. Each person can *doubt* God's power in his or her own individual way. Thus the story of Parsahat Shelah Lekha forms a kind of undoing of the revelation at Sinai which we celebrated just a few weeks ago at Shavuot. The people were condemned to die out in the desert because they had failed God's expectations—having experienced Sinai through the power of each individual soul, they fail God by their very human weaknesses.

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