



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Family Edition

שלח-לך תשע"ט
Shelach Lecha
5779

**Fear of
Freedom**

WELCOME TO COVENANT & CONVERSATION 5779 FAMILY EDITION

Covenant & Conversation: Family Edition is a new and exciting initiative from *The Office of Rabbi Sacks* for 5779. Written as an accompaniment to Rabbi Sacks' weekly *Covenant & Conversation* essay, the Family Edition is aimed at connecting teenagers and families with his ideas and thoughts on the parsha. To receive this via email please make sure you are subscribed to Rabbi Sacks' main mailing list at www.RabbiSacks.org/Subscribe.



PARSHAT SHELACH LECHA IN A NUTSHELL

Parshat Shelach Lecha tells the story of twelve spies sent to check out the land of Canaan. Ten return with an indecisive and fearful report: the land is good but the people are giants and their cities invincible. Two, Joshua and Caleb, argue the opposite – but the people ignore them because they are scared and downhearted. They say, “Let us appoint a leader and go back to Egypt” (Bamidbar. 14:4).

God becomes angry and threatens to destroy the people and start again with Moshe. Moshe intervenes, and God decides

that the people will be punished by having to spend forty years in the desert. Their children will eventually enter the land, not them.

There then follows a series of laws about sacrifices, challah, and forgiveness for sins committed by mistake. This section of laws is interrupted by a short story about a Shabbat-breaker. The parsha ends with the law about tzitzit, fringes on the corners of garments, a text we recite each day as the third paragraph of the Shema.



THE CORE IDEA

The story of the spies is one of the most tragic in the entire Torah. Twelve spies are chosen to visit the land of Canaan and bring back a report about it: Are the people many or few, strong or weak? What is the land itself like? Is the soil fertile? They were also told to bring back some of fruit. The spies returned with a positive report about the land itself: “It is indeed flowing with milk and honey, and this is its fruit” (Bamidbar 13:27). From ten of the spies, there then followed one of the most famous ‘buts’ in Jewish history: “But – the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of Anak [‘the giant’] there” (13:28).

Sensing that these words were distressing the people, Caleb, one of the other two spies, reassured them: “We should go up and take over the land, for we can certainly do it.” But the ten spies insisted: “We cannot attack those people; they are stronger than us... All the people we saw there are huge... We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and so we were in their eyes” (Numbers 13:30–33). The next day, the people, persuaded that the challenge was completely beyond

them, said they regretted ever leaving Egypt and said, “Let us appoint a leader and go back to Egypt” (14:4).

The story is deeply puzzling. How could ten of the spies come back with such a negative report? Only one year before, they had seen with their own eyes how God had saved them from Egypt, the strongest of all the empires of the ancient world. They had seen the Egyptian army with its cutting-edge military technology, the horse-drawn chariot, drown in the sea, while they passed through safely, on dry land. Before Egypt was defeated, it had been far stronger than the groups of people they would have to confront to conquer the land.

Stranger still, we find out later that the people of the land were entirely different from how they had been described here. In the haftarah this week, taken from the Book of Joshua, we discover the people of Jericho were not giants. And they were as fearful of the Israelites as the Israelites were of them.

The spies were not random people from among the population. The Torah states that they were “heads of the People of Israel.” They were leaders, not people easily scared. So why did they bring back a report so exaggerated, so terrifying to the Children of Israel that it caused them to decide to give up, turn around and return to Egypt.

It was this questions that led the Lubavitcher Rebbe (Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson), to give a radical interpretation of the episode. He said, the spies were not afraid of failure. They were afraid of success.

Until now the people were in continuous contact with the Shechinah (Divine Presence). God provided for them everything they needed as a people. Never had a people lived so close to God. But once they entered they had a land of their own, everything would change. They would be

responsible for their own food, their security, and all their earthly needs. They feared these distractions. Their mistake was the mistake of very holy men. They wanted to spend their lives close to God, with no distractions.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What does the Lubavitcher Rebbe mean by "they were afraid of success"?
2. Why would life in the land of Israel be a distraction to their closeness to God?
3. According to this interpretation, the spies lacked faith. But faith in whom?



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

In 1968 I was a student at Cambridge University, with plans to one day be a professor of philosophy, or of economics. That summer, I came to America hoping to meet the great intellectual leaders and Rabbis of the day, and every one of them told me to see the Rebbe! So I went to 770 Eastern Parkway and said to the first Chassid I met there, “I’d like to speak to the Rebbe, please.” He just laughed and laughed. He said, “Do you know how many thousands of people are waiting to see the Rebbe? Forget it!” I explained I would be traveling around America and would come back to New York any time, if there was a chance. I left the phone number of my aunt in Los Angeles. “If it’s possible, call me,” I said.

Weeks later, soon after Shabbat ended, someone from Chabad called and said “The Rebbe will see you on Thursday.” I only had enough money for a Greyhound bus ticket, so I sat on a bus for seventy-two hours non-stop from Los Angeles to New York.

I arrived at 770, and when my turn came, I was ushered into the Rebbe’s study. I asked him all my intellectual, philosophical questions and he gave intellectual, philosophical answers. But then he did what no one else had done. He reversed the roles and started asking me questions. How many Jewish students are in Cambridge? How many are involved in Jewish life? What are you doing to bring

others closer to Judaism? I had come to ask the Rebbe my questions and all of a sudden he was challenging me! So I began mumbling “In the situation in which I find myself...” – and then the Rebbe did something quite unusual for him. He interrupted me mid-sentence. He said, “Nobody finds themselves in a situation; you *put* yourself in a situation. And if you put yourself in that situation, you can put yourself into another situation.”

That moment changed my life. There I was, a nobody from nowhere, and there he was, one of the greatest leaders in the Jewish world challenging me not to look at the bigger picture, and not just accept the situation, but to change it. He told me to help Jews discover their roots. He said we needed more Rabbis. He told me this was my task, to teach Torah and to train Rabbis. At that moment I realised the Rebbe’s greatness was not that he had thousands of followers. A great leader creates other leaders. That’s what the Rebbe did for me and for thousands of others.

1. How did the Rebbe change Rabbi Sacks' life?
2. How did the Rebbe's message to Rabbi Sacks connect to his interpretation of the story of the spies?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

During their time in the wilderness, the people ate manna from heaven, drank water from a miraculous well, and were surrounded by Clouds of Glory. They were camped around the Mishkan. They were in continuous contact with the Shechinah. Never had a people lived so close to God. When they entered

the land their situation would be radically different. They would have to fight battles, maintain an army, create an economy, farm the land, worry about the weather, and deal with all the other hundreds of distractions that come from living in this world. What would happen to their closeness to

God when they were preoccupied with mundane and material pursuits. In the desert they could spend their entire lives learning Torah, lit by the radiance of the Divine. In their own land they would be one more nation in a world of nations with the same kind of economic, social, and political problems that every nation has to deal with.

The spies were not afraid of failure. They were afraid of success. They wanted to spend their lives in the closest possible proximity to God. What they did not understand was that God seeks, in the Midrashic phrase, “a dwelling in the lower worlds.” One of the great differences between Judaism and other religions is that while others seek to lift people to heaven, Judaism seeks to bring heaven down to earth.

Much of Torah is about things not conventionally seen as religious at all: labour relations, agriculture, welfare provisions, loans and debts, land ownership, and so on. It is often suggested that the ideal location an intensely religious or spiritual experience is in the desert, or in a monastic retreat, or in an ashram. But that is not the Jewish way. God wanted the Israelites to create a model society where human beings were not treated as slaves, where rulers were not worshipped as demigods, where human dignity was respected, where law was impartially administered to rich and poor alike, where no one

was destitute, no one was abandoned to isolation, no one was above the law, and no realm of life was a morality-free zone. That requires a society, and a society needs a land. It requires an economy, an army, fields and flocks, labour and enterprise. All these, in Judaism, become ways of bringing the Shechinah into the shared spaces of our collective life.

The spies did not doubt that Israel could win its battles with the inhabitants of the land. Their concern was not physical but spiritual. They did not want to leave the wilderness and lose their unique relationship with God in the deep silence of the desert, far removed from civilisation and its distractions. Ultimately the spies feared freedom and its responsibilities. This was the mistake of deeply religious men – but it was a mistake, for although there is something noble about this desire, it was also profoundly irresponsible. Ten of the spies demoralised the people and provoked the anger of God.

The Torah is about the responsibilities of freedom. Judaism is not a religion of monastic retreat from the world. It is a religion of engagement with the world. God chose Israel to make His presence visible in the world. Therefore *Israel must live in the world*. The Jewish task is not to fear the real world but to enter and transform it, healing some of its wounds and bringing to places often shrouded in darkness fragments of Divine light.



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

This is the challenge of Judaism in the State of Israel in our time... Its role is to create, shape, drive and motivate civil society. If religion is not seen by Israelis as a unifying force in society, if religious Jews are not admired for their work with the poor, the lonely and the vulnerable, if Judaism is not the voice of justice and compassion, then something is wrong in the soul of Israel. To be sure, some of this work happens already; there are many admirable examples. But there is much more to be done. Judaism in Israel today has lost the prophetic instinct when it needs it most... [Zionism] must regain what Jewry had even when it lacked a state, namely a profound sense of responsibility to the weak, the poor, the socially marginalised, the neglected and unheard. That is the

challenge for a new religious Zionism: to build a society worthy of being a home for the divine presence by honouring the divine image in all its citizens.

Future Tense, p. 178-180

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Do you think religion is seen today in Israel in the way Rabbi Sacks describes? If not, why not?
2. How is the vision described in this text a fulfillment of the message of the story of the spies?



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. How many reasons can you think of that make it hard to understand why ten of the spies brought a negative report back with them??
2. What does the Lubavitcher Rebbe mean by "they were afraid of success"?
3. Why might life in the land of Israel weaken the people's relationship with God?
4. According to this interpretation, the spies lacked faith. But faith in whom?
5. How does Judaism "seek to bring heaven down to earth."?



QUESTION TIME

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EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

THE CORE IDEA

1. The simple understanding of this episode is that the spies were afraid of being unsuccessful in their campaign to conquer the land, and that they did not have enough faith in God and in His promise that they would be successful. The Rebbe's radical re-interpretation is that they were afraid of being successful in the conquest, because this would have led to a life of distraction from their main goal – remaining closely connected to God.
2. If they succeeded in conquering and settling the land they would have to fight battles, maintain an army, create an economy, farm the land, worry about whether there would be enough rain to produce a crop, and all the other thousand distractions that come from living in the world. These preoccupations with mundane and material pursuits would be a distraction from learning Torah and remaining in the closest proximity to God.
3. According to the Rebbe's interpretation, they didn't lack faith in God (the more classic reading of the story) but rather they lacked faith in themselves and in the people's ability to remain close to God once they had additional worries, distractions and occupations.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. Rabbi Sacks was considering a career in academia or as an economist, and the Rebbe changed his life path by inspiring him to become a leader of the Jewish world, first in the student community of the University of Cambridge, and later as a Rabbi.
2. The Rebbe did not believe in long-term sheltering within the walls of the yeshiva or the ivory towers of academic institutions (as Rabbi Sacks was himself considering) which are both far from the people and the real world. As leader of Chabad, he instructed his followers to go out into the world (all over the world, even to places where there is no organised Jewish community) and lead the Jewish people.

FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

1. This is a contentious subject that Rabbi Sacks explores at length in his book *Future Tense* in the chapter *A New Zionism*. There he suggests that when religion and politics mix, religion ceases to be a force for good in society.
2. Torah Judaism is not supposed to be lived only in the yeshiva, or in the desert. It is a code of living upon which a model society can be created. The spies (according to this interpretation) feared a corrupting influence of real life, feeling it to be a distraction from their personal relationship with God. Both the Rebbe and Rabbi Sacks in this text argue that the Torah must be lived and applied to the "real world" so we can "bring heaven down to earth".

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. They had seen with their own eyes the miraculous Exodus from Egypt the strongest empire in history; they had seen the Egyptian army with its cutting-edge military technology drown in the sea; Egypt was far stronger than the Canaanites; and this had all just happened not much more than a year before; they were entirely wrong about the people of the land, who it turned out feared the Israelites and God; the spies were not regular people but leaders of the people and not given lightly to fear.
2. See *The Core Idea*, answer 1.
3. See *The Core Idea*, answer 2.
4. See *The Core Idea*, answer 3.
5. There are other religions or religious systems of thought that focus on "lifting people to heaven", and are primarily concerned with achieving individual salvation and a place in heaven. (They avoid all physical distractions, wherever possible.) There are also Jewish thinkers that focus on this also. However, at the core of the thought of Rabbi Sacks is Judaism's focus on the Torah being a code of living, bringing heaven down to earth by creating a society based on the values of the Torah. "God wanted the Israelites to create a model society where human beings were not treated as slaves, where rulers were not worshipped as demigods, where human dignity was respected, where law was impartially administered to rich and poor alike, where no one was destitute, no one was abandoned to isolation, no one was above the law, and no realm of life was a morality-free zone. That requires a society, and a society needs a land. It requires an economy, an army, fields and flocks, labour and enterprise. All these, in Judaism, become ways of bringing the *Shechinah* into the shared spaces of our collective life." This is how we are to "bring heaven down to earth".