



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Family Edition

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS



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בס"ד

שלח לך תש"ף
Shelach Lecha
5780

**What is
going on?**

** KEY IDEA OF THE WEEK **

The story we tell affects the decisions we make



PARSHAT SHELACH LECHA IN A NUTSHELL

Twelve men are sent by Moses to check out the Land of Israel before the people journey there. Ten of the men come back with a mixed report. They say that the land is very good but the people are giants and their cities will be impossible to conquer. The other two men, Joshua and Caleb, say that with God's help everything will be fine. But the people are scared by what they have learnt and they beg to return to Egypt.

God becomes angry at the people's lack of faith and threatens to destroy them (and to start again with Moses). Moses prays on behalf of the people and God relents. He decides instead that the people must spend forty years in the desert instead of entering the land immediately and directly.

The entire generation will die naturally in the desert and only their children will enter the land.

The *parsha* also includes a list of laws about sacrifices, challah, and forgiveness for sins committed by mistake. Then this list is interrupted with a short story about a man who breaks Shabbat on purpose. The *parsha* ends with the laws of tzitzit, the fringes on the corners of garments. These words become the third paragraph of the Shema that we say every day and every night.

QUESTION TO PONDER:

Why do you think Joshua and Caleb saw things differently to the other ten spies?



THE CORE IDEA

Understanding our life's story is important for making the right decisions. Sometimes we need to ask "What is going on?" before deciding how to react. We can learn this by studying Shelach Lecha

We may think that we already know this story. Moses sent twelve spies to explore the land. Ten of them came back with a negative tone to their report: The land is good, but unconquerable. The people are strong, the cities indestructible, the inhabitants are giants and we are like grasshoppers. Only two of the twelve men, Joshua and Caleb, saw things differently. They said: We can win. The land is good. God is on our side. With His help, we cannot fail.

On this reading, Joshua and Caleb had faith, courage and confidence, while the other ten men did not. But this is hard

to understand. All of these men – not just Joshua and Caleb – knew that God was with them. He had saved them from Egypt. The Israelites had just defeated the Amalekites. How could these ten who were all leaders and princes, not know that they could defeat the inhabitants of the land?

What is really going on? Biblical Hebrew has two verbs that mean "to spy": *lachpor* and *leragel* (from which we get the word *meraglim*, "spies"). It is important to note that *neither of these words appear in our parsha*. Instead, no less than twelve times, we encounter the rare verb, *la-tur*. This verb was revived in modern Hebrew and means (and sounds like) "to tour." *Tayar* is a tourist. There is all the difference in the world between a tourist and a spy.

Malbim explains the difference simply. *Latur* means to seek out the good. That is what tourists do. They go to the

beautiful, the magnificent, the inspiring. They don't spend their time trying to find out what is bad. *Lachpor* and *leragel* are the opposite. They are about discovering a place's weaknesses and vulnerabilities. That is what spies do. The exclusive use of the verb *latur* in our *parsha* – repeated twelve times – is there to tell us that *the twelve men were not sent to spy*.

Their mission was actually *latur*: to explore and report on the good things of the land so that the people would know it

was worth fighting for, not to find out if it was possible to conquer it. Sadly, only two men understood their mission.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. When you were last a tourist in a foreign place, what did you see? Did you like what you saw?
2. Why do you think the ten spies misunderstood their mission?



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

Steve Jobs' biological mother Joanne was an unmarried college graduate who decided to put her baby up for adoption. But she asked that the adoptive parents also be college graduates. When Steve was born, the couple that had arranged to adopt him changed their minds and decided that they wanted a girl instead. Another interested family was contacted and agreed immediately to take him. They were good people, but they were not rich, or college graduates, as Joanne had hoped. Joanne was reluctant for them to raise her son, but in the end she agreed because they pledged that one day Steve would go to college.

18 years later, Steve was in college as planned, but after just one semester, he decided it was too much for his parents to pay for such an expensive education. So he dropped out. For the next few years he lived on practically nothing, sleeping on the floor of friends' dorms, making a few dollars by returning Coca-Cola bottles for 5 cents each. He decided to try going to some college classes again without being enrolled or receiving credit, but this time he only attended the lectures that truly interested him. This included a course in calligraphy, which fascinated him. The result was that when he and Steve Wozniak built their first computers, they incorporated the choice of multiple fonts, which gave an element of beauty to the documents composed on these machines, and have been a standard feature of computers ever since.

Steve faced a deep personal crisis when he was dismissed from Apple, the company that he and Wozniak had built from

nothing in his parents' garage, which had grown into a company with 4000 employees and a value of \$2 billion. Anyone else might have given up in despair at this point, but Jobs did not. Instead, he created a new computer company called NeXT, and bought another one, Pixar Animations, which became the first maker of computer-animated films and produced – starting with *Toy Story* – a string of works of imaginative genius.

At the age of just forty-eight he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, which made him re-evaluate what really mattered. All external considerations of pride or fear, embarrassment or failure fell away, leaving only what was truly important.

Jobs would often talk about connecting the dots in his life. He constructed a narrative to give his life meaning, focusing on what made his life a story and on what kind of story it was. It was a story of hope, of overcoming adversity, a tale of how despite his hardships, (financial struggles, no relationship with his biological parents), he still emerged with his head held high, having made life better not just for himself, but for others also.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. How is the way Steve Jobs saw the story of his life related to the story of the twelve spies?
2. Have you ever tried to "connect the dots" of the story of your life?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

The reason ten of the twelve men came back with a negative report is not because they lacked courage or confidence or faith. It was because *they completely misunderstood their mission*. They thought they had been sent to be spies. But the Torah never uses the word "spy" in our chapter. The ten simply did not understand what was going on.

They believed it was their role to find out the vulnerabilities of the land, where its defences could be overcome. They looked and could not find any. The people were strong, and the cities impregnable. The bad news about the land was that there was not enough bad news to make it weak and thus conquerable.

Thinking their task was to be spies, they did their best. They were honest and open. They reported what they had seen. Based on the intelligence they had gathered, they advised the people not to attack – not now, and not from here.

Their mistake was that *they were not meant to be spies*. They were told *latur*, not *lachpor* or *leragel*. Their job was to tour, explore, travel, see what the land was like and report back. They were to see what was good about the land, not what was bad. So, now we must ask ourselves: if they were not meant to be spies, what was the purpose of this mission?

I suggest that the answer is to be found in a passage in the Talmud (Kiddushin 41a) that states: it is forbidden for a man to marry a woman without seeing her first. The reason? Were he to marry without having seen her first, he might, when he does see her, find he is not attracted to her. Tensions will then inevitably arise. Hence the idea: *first see, then love*.

The same applies to a marriage between a people and its land. The Israelites were travelling to the country promised to their ancestors. But none of them had ever seen it. How then could they be expected to muster the energies necessary to fight the battles involved in conquering the land? They were about to marry a land they had not seen. They had no idea what they were fighting for.

The twelve men were sent *latur*: to explore and report on the good things of the land so that the people would know it was worth fighting for. Their task was to tour and explore, not spy and decry. But only two of them, Joshua and Caleb, listened carefully and understood what their mission was: to be the eyes of the congregation, letting them know the beauty and goodness of what lay ahead, the land that had been their destiny since the days of their ancestor Abraham.

The Israelites at that stage did not need spies. As Moses said many years later: "You did not trust in the Lord your God, who went ahead of you on your journey, in fire by night and in a cloud by day, to search out places for you to camp and to show you the way you should go" (Devarim 1:32-33). God was going to show them where to go and where to attack.

The people needed something else entirely. Moses had told them that the land was good. It was "flowing with milk and honey." But Moses had never seen the land. Why should they believe him? They needed the independent testimony of eyewitnesses. That was the mission of the twelve men. And in fact, all twelve fulfilled that mission. When they returned, the first thing they said was: "We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here are its fruits" (Bamidbar 13:27). But because ten of them thought their task was to be spies, they went on to say that the conquest was impossible, and from then on, tragedy was inevitable.

The difference between Joshua and Caleb compared to the other ten men is not that the former two had the faith, courage and confidence the latter ten men lacked. It is that they understood the story; the ten did not. Ten of the twelve men thought they were part of a story of espionage. The result was that they looked for the wrong things, came to the wrong conclusion, demoralised the people, destroyed the hope of an entire generation, and will eternally be remembered as being responsible for one of the worst failures in Jewish history.

I believe that the story we tell affects the decisions we make. Get the story wrong and we can rob an entire generation of their future. Get it right, as did Joshua and Caleb, and we can achieve greatness.

QUESTION TO PONDER:

What helped Joshua and Caleb get the story right? How can we do this in our own lives?



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

Narrative is how we construct meaning out of the flow of events, and the fact that it does not have simple criteria of verification or refutation the way science does, does not mean that it is mere fiction. To the contrary, storytelling is of the essence of who we are as meaning-seeking animals... We are, in large measure, the story we tell about ourselves, which means that we are always a work in process. Nor do we construct our story out of nothing. Our lives, our culture, our faith, all shape the narrative which, in itself, then reshapes our life.

Morality, pp. 255-256



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. How does asking the question "What is going on?" help us to make the right decisions in our lives?
2. If all the spies had asked this question, what should the answer have been and how would that have changed the mission?
3. How do you think we will look back at the current global crises? What narratives will we be able to identify?



QUESTION TIME

Do you want to win a **Koren Aviv Weekday Siddur**? Email CCFamilyEdition@rabbisacks.org with your name, age, city and your best question based on the ideas from the *Covenant & Conversation Family Edition*. **Entrants must be 18 or younger.** Thank you to Koren Publishers for kindly donating these wonderful siddurim.



IN A NUTSHELL

1. Our traditional understanding is that Caleb and Joshua had stronger faith in God, allowing them to be more positive when they saw the land and its inhabitants. Another reading, as we will see in the message of the *Covenant & Conversation* this week, is that they had a better understanding of their mission – to bring back information on the positive aspects of the land.

THE CORE IDEA

1. As tourists, we tend to see the nicest parts of the countries we visit and leave with a positive impression of them. Every country has beautiful aspects and sites, and we aim to enjoy our visits, so we invest in those parts of the country. Help your child or student remember the places they have visited and relate to the real mission of the 12 men according to Rabbi Sacks.
2. The ten spies lost track of the real mission because they feared the momentous task ahead of them – to conquer a fortified land with a strong nation inhabiting it. This fear caused them to lose their faith (or at least to lose their perspective on the role that God would play).

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. Steve Jobs reflected on the episodes of his life as a continuous story and took a positive and constructive approach to the narrative he created for himself. He always saw himself as the subject of the narrative, rather than the object (where he would have been passive to external factors deciding his fate). This allowed him to give meaning to all the events that he experienced. He kept a sense of this meaning throughout his life. The spies lost the sense that their situation was part of a narrative, with meaning and destiny, and thus they were led to making a catastrophic mistake in the way they reported their experiences to the people when they returned from their mission.
2. This is more challenging for young lives, but try and help your child or student to construct a story where they are the subject, finding meaning in the events of their life, allowing them to see the larger picture and narrative, and reflect on the decisions they have made (or others have made for them) in this respect.

THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. Joshua and Caleb always kept the larger picture in mind – they were God's people, on a journey to their destiny in the Promised Land, where God had promised to help them conquer the inhabitants and deliver the land to them. In the context of the larger picture, it was easier to keep their faith that God would fulfil His promises to them. With this faith, they could return to the people from their mission with a positive report on the land.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

These questions are all open, to encourage thought and debate. There are no wrong answers. However, here are some thoughts to consider:

1. Seeing our life as a narrative (or the life of a nation, or humanity as a whole) helps us to see the larger picture. It helps us to take a step back, reflect and find meaning in our lives, and then make decisions based on the meaning we have found, bringing us closer to the desired destiny.
2. If the ten spies had asked this question as Joshua and Caleb did, had they taken a step back and seen the bigger picture, they might have found it easier to find faith in God's plan. Had they kept their perspective and curbed their fears, they could have seen that they were part of a historic narrative that began in Egypt, and ultimately was to end in the Promised Land. They might have seen that they were being asked to play a key role in that moment, to help reassure the people that the Land of Israel was worth fighting for. Once the people had a stronger connection to the land, they could all find peace of mind and faith that God would be with them at the critical moment when they were to enter the land.
3. The challenging element of this theory is identifying the narrative (what Steve Jobs termed "connecting the dots" – see *It Once Happened*). Sometimes this can only happen in retrospect, once we have hindsight and can see the full picture. We hope that this challenging period in the history of humanity will one day be remembered for the positive, for humanity growing and evolving as a species, and learning critical lessons from our global crises. But perhaps it is too soon to know whether this will be remembered as humanities' finest hour, or tragically the opposite. We pray for the former.