

DRASH FOR SH'LAH L'KHA 5772

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Today's Torah portion makes me think about faith in G-d and faith in ourselves, similarly, where our strength comes from – from G-d or from ourselves.

This parsha and the haftorah that follows, describes an evolution in the life of the Jewish people, a step toward maturity and strength.

In today's Torah portion the children of Israel have arrived at Canaan, the Promised Land. G-d has promised them that they would be able to conquer it. However, despite G-d's promise the people do not feel confident that they can in fact do that.

As it starts, G-d tells Moses to scout the land of Canaan, **which I am giving to the Israelite people**. There are 2 points here. The footnotes tell us that the verb used for "send" implies "send for yourself", meaning, that you, the people, are sending these scouts on your own behalf, not because I am directing you to do so. You need this reassurance to carry on and seize your destiny in Canaan. Also, G-d says, the land of Canaan **which I am giving to the Israelite people**. G-d reminds Moses that they do not need scouts to collect information to help them decide **whether or not** they should enter. G-d is giving it to them.

What is the problem? Giving the Promised Land to the Jews is a different gift from those G-d has given them since Egypt. G-d freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt with many miracles, culminating in the death of the first-borns, the parting of the Red Sea, the closing of the Red Sea, the giving of the Torah, the providing of manna to sustain them in the desert. But for this final step, the goal of the Exodus, the Jews must rise to the occasion and do something to achieve their destiny as a free people in a free state.

The scouts come back with a "good news/bad news" account. The good news is that the land is flowing with milk and honey. The bad news was that "the people who inhabit it are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large; moreover we saw the Anakites there."

Caleb did not disagree with these facts, yet still said to the people "Let us **by all means** go up, and we shall gain possession of it, for we shall **surely** overcome it."

Caleb had not the least doubt – let us **BY ALL MEANS** go up he says, and we shall **SURELY** overcome it. He had internalized G-d's promise that the people of Israel were destined to claim this land and now they had to do it.

In contrast, the scouts did not have confidence in Israel's ability to achieve their objective, and to win the people over to their belief they revise their account to make it scarier: "We **cannot** attack that people for it is stronger than we. The country we scouted is one that **devours its settlers**. All the men we saw in it are men of great size – and **we looked like grasshoppers to ourselves and so we must have looked to them.**"

In speaking of the land, the scouts have presented contradictory descriptions. First, it is a land “flowing with milk and honey”, a rich and poetic metaphor for an agricultural nation, yet immediately after Caleb’s exhortation that they move ahead with G-d’s plan, they describe it as a land that devours its settlers. In a 1993 article Alon Ben-Meir relates interpretations of this phrase. “Some scholars suggest that since the land was occupied by very strong and giant-looking men living in fortified cities, only such men could survive the harsh conditions. Hence the land must be a land that would consume its weaker dwellers. Other scholars explained that the scouts meant that in waging war against this formidable enemy they would fail to conquer the land and die in a massive slaughter, thus be consumed by the land.

Ben-Meir goes on to relate Rashi’s interpretation of these contradictory statements. Rashi views them as two potential outcomes, yes, but the actual one will be **dependent wholly on the inhabitants themselves**. Should the governors be just, the people be compassionate, and adhere to high morals in their conduct, and should they live in peace and respect each other’s rights, then the land would flow with milk and honey. But if hatred and animosity prevailed, if greed, revenge, and cruelty were to feed the soul, the inhabitants would eventually perish.

And the people who lived there, whom the scouts described as powerful and large, they blew up to a size that they said, made them (the Israelites) them looked like grasshoppers **to themselves** and so, they said, we must have looked to them.”

“We **cannot** attack that people for it is stronger than we.” The translation can also mean, stronger than he (G-d).” They lack faith in G-d and faith in themselves.

As Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, former chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary wrote in 1994, The repeated rebellions against G-d and Moses in the wilderness demonstrate that miracles could not steel the faith of Israel for adversity. **The exodus had freed Israel from bondage, but failed to transform its mental state of dependence and passivity.**

Israel is unready to endure the military struggle it would take to conquer Canaan. **While miracles had brought Israel this far, this conquest would have to be of their own doing.** Instead of taking them into the Promised Land, they would die in the desert, and only their children, those who had never been slaves would found their state. It was not only the slave mentality that made them unfit to take ownership of the Promised Land, but the fact that since Egypt, they had not acquired any strength of character. G-d brought them out of Egypt, gave them the laws, and now promised them victory in Canaan. But they did not have the self-confidence to do their part in this next step of history. We cannot attack that people, for it is stronger than **we**.” As the footnotes say, **the word translated “than we” can also be read as “than Him”**. Their lack of faith in themselves came to include a lack of faith in G-d’s power to bring them to victory.

G-d promised this land to the Jewish people, but **not necessarily to this specific generation** of Jews. If they were not up to the challenge, then they could not gain the land. Instead, the Jews who would grow to

maturity in the desert, without miracles, would develop for themselves the strength and self-confidence to fight for their destiny. **In the words of Maimonides: "It is known that but for their misery and weariness in the desert, they would not have been able to conquer the land and to fight.... For prosperity does away with courage, whereas a hard life and fatigue necessarily produce courage..."**

After 40 years a new generation, who had not experienced rescue and miracles, had the strength of will to enter the Promised Land and conquer it for themselves. In the haftarah we fast forward 40 years to Joshua's reconnoitering in Canaan. This time the Jews are on their own. No miracle will intervene. But they will prevail.

Fast forward again – to thousands of years later, when a generation of Jewish leaders in the Diaspora set their sights on **reestablishing** a Jewish state in Israel. There was no reliance on G-d as a wholly separate force to make this happen. Instead, it would be human aspiration and courage. As Theodore Herzl, the father of modern Zionism said "if you will it, then it is no dream."

The will to reestablish a Jewish state in Israel triumphed over the British and Arabs in the 1920's, 30's, and 40's, through the war for independence, the 6-day war in 1967, and Yom Kippur war in 1973, and continuous acts of Arab terrorism during and since those years. Today Israel covers 21,643 sq. km. and has nearly 8 million inhabitants in total. Her immediate 4 neighbors alone, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon, cover 1,285,000 sq km and have a population of 115 million.

Israel actually **is the size of a grasshopper** in relation to these giants, but does she think of herself as a grasshopper? Does the rest of the world? **Not at all.**

I had to look up who said "G-d helps those who help themselves". It was Benjamin Franklin. What Israel learns when they first approach the Promised Land is that once delivered from Egypt, and brought through the desert with manna, is that they themselves would have to create future miracles. Our faith in G-d is our faith in ourselves.

So does our strength come from ourselves or from G-d? Or from ourselves and then from G-d? And where does a Jew who does not believe in G-d get their strength? The answer is in Joshua: **"Place confidence in G-d, strengthen yourself and He will give you courage."**

-- Ellen Hochman