Sh'lach: Bamidbar (Numbers)

What's it all about?



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Moses dispatches twelve spies to survey the land of Canaan. They return forty days later with grapes, a pomegranate, and a fig, but ten out of the twelve report that the land is riddled with giants who are powerful and will overpower the Israelites. **Only Caleb and Joshua have faith that the land can be conquered, just as God had promised**.

The people cry out that they would like to return to Egypt, leading God to decree that **they must spend forty years in the desert**, so that the whole generation of doubters can die in the wilderness. The Amalekites and the Canaanites once again attack a group of Jews, and the laws of meal, wine, and oil offerings are given, as well as the mitzvah to set aside and consecrate a portion of the dough when baking Challah. A man violates Shabbat and is put to death, and God orders the Israelites to place fringes, or *tzitzit*, on the corners of their garments, so that they remember to fulfill the mitzvot.

"“We saw there fallen angels, who are descendants of a giant descended from the original fallen angels. We seemed to ourselves as tiny as grasshoppers next to them, and so did we seem to them!”"

Take a deeper dive

All of the twelve spies who set out to explore Canaan were important men. All were wise, pious, leaders of their tribes. Why, then, did ten come back reporting that the land was crawling with malicious giants, and two, Caleb and Joshua, came back and reported that "the land we traveled through to inspect is an exceedingly good land"? **What did these two see that no one else did?**

The late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks asked the same question, and he turned for inspiration to the work of Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck. Giving a group of ten-year-olds a difficult puzzle to solve, Dweck wanted to know why some kids just gave up while others kept at it until they succeeded. Her research led to an interesting conclusion: Some people believe that their abilities are given and cannot be changed; these people, Dweck wrote, have a "fixed mindset." Others believe that it's precisely by making an effort that we can grow and thrive; these people, Dweck continued, have a "growth mindset."

The former avoid conflicts and challenges because they fear failure and don't believe there's much they can really do to rise to the occasion. The latter welcome a good challenge, knowing that it will only make them thrive. And Joshua and Caleb were both the growth mindset personified.

Caleb, Rabbi Sacks observed, is a descendant of Judah, Jacob's son most closely associated with *teshuvah*, or repentance. Despite being the one who proposes to sell Joseph to slavery, Judah grows, learns to accept responsibility, and understands that his actions can change the world for the better, a lesson he bequeaths to Caleb. And Joshua too, the parsha tells us, was a man transformed: Originally called Hoshea, his name is changed by Moses, who understands that the young man possesses precisely the mindset that will allow him to grow.

"The story of the spies holds a significant message for us," Rabbi Sacks concluded. "God does not ask us never to fail. He asks of us that we give of our best. He lifts us when we fall and forgives us when we fail. It is this that gives us the courage to take risks… Hence the paradoxical but deeply liberating truth: Fear of failure causes us to fail. It is the willingness to fail that allows us to succeed." We may not face challenges as dramatic as inheriting the Promised Land, but the insight is relevant to everything we may choose to do.

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