

“Shelach lecha: The knots in the tzitzit and the faithless spies”

Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M Cohen

Suppose we were seeking to excuse the spies for their negative report of the Promised Land and the Israelites for readily believing them, we might suggest that it was the result of an ingrained pessimism, bordering on national depression and occasioned by the 400 years they had spent in Egypt with all its attendant oppression. This attitude might also explain their panicked reaction to Moses' delay of but one day in returning from Sinai, leading to their worshipping of the Golden Calf.

In truth, their history had hardly given them cause for any degree of optimism. It was fine for Walt Whitman to counsel, 'Keep your face always toward the sunshine and the shadows will fall behind you,' but the Israelites had no sunshine to enjoy or to dispel the shadows. As slaves, their noses were constantly bent to the grindstone, and as they travelled through the desert, a pillar of cloud, which was both physical and metaphorical, blocked out the sunshine of optimism by day.

To possess a mindset of positivity, one needs to have been reared in an atmosphere where one was instinctively conditioned to seek out the constructive aspects of any situation, even when, *prima facie*, the evidence would seem to point to the contrary. This was precisely the situation that confronted the 12 spies that Moses sent out to satisfy the nation's apprehensions that the Canaanites might prove too strong for them and prevent them from conquering and settling the Promised Land.

On their return, they reported what they had seen in Canaan in a manner that could have been interpreted in either of two ways. They readily acknowledged that it was ‘indeed a land flowing with milk and honey,’ and they brought back samples of its gigantic fruit to prove it, in the form of clusters of grapes, each one so heavy that no man could carry it on his own, but which needed to be supported and carried on poles (see Nu. 13:26-).

Had the spies internalised positivity, they would have reasoned that that was precisely why God had described the land as flowing with natural abundance. But, instead, their instinct was to give this situation a negative slant, which they emphasised with their loaded introductory word, *efes*, ‘However,’ and with their intimidatory references to the might of the various occupants of the land:

“However – the inhabitants of the land are powerful, the cities are mightily fortified, and we also saw there the Anakite giants.

Amalekites dwell in the southern region; Hittites, Jebusites, and Amorites inhabit the hill country; and Canaanites dwell by the Sea and along the Jordan” (Nu.13:28-29).

Thus, all their praise of the land’s agricultural abundance was countered by the fear they sought to instil by relating the list of the formidable enemies that surrounded it. The weight of the fruit they brought back was, they implied, a measure of the fact that its produce was not the fare of ordinary people, but rather of superhumans with superhuman strength and appetites.

But the innate Israelite negativity – however we may seek to explain or justify it – was truly no excuse for the kind of report they brought back. We should not forget that this was not some unknown country that they were seeking to conquer. This was, after all, the land of

their forefathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and many traditions regarding their sojourn in that land would have been passed down as their offspring's cherished heritage. Furthermore, the southern hill country of the Negev – the area where Moses directed the spies to make for (see vv. 17-18) – was precisely where the patriarchal families had lived, in the vicinity of Hebron (where Abraham had purchased the Cave of Machpelah as a family burial plot), Bet El, Beersheva and Shechem. Had there been any fear of giants or had the climate or agriculture in the area made it unsuitable for habitation, the Israelites would certainly have known of it, and Moses would certainly not have directed the spies to make it the prime area of their scrutiny.

As for the giants of Anak, they were not occupants of any specific country that might have constituted a real military threat to the incoming Israelites. The reference to them as inhabitants of 'Hebron, Devir, Anav, the entire hill country of Judah and the entire hill country of Israel' (Josh.11:21-22), suggests that they were an immigrant nomadic people, with a reputation for violence. Joshua had little difficulty, however, in wiping them out from all their areas, with a remnant fleeing to the Philistine cities of Gaza, Gath and Ashdod.

Significantly, the spies used the term, '*we saw* some giants of Anak there' (v. 28), indicative of a small passing group. The biblical references to them (and their links in some passages to the Nephilim, 'fallen angels' of Gen. 6:4) place them rather in the realm of folklore.

Nevertheless, God had assured them that they would inherit that land, and they should have been in no doubt that He could deal with giants just as he had dealt with the entire army of Pharaoh at the Red Sea. And then again, giants could be felled with a blow, as the young David had demonstrated, armed with only a sling.

But the spies were negative and fearful, as were the people to whom they reported. not positive thinkers.

The spies also reported on their return that, “The people there are strong because their cities are greatly fortified.” That, again, was a negative inference. Indeed, Rashi, quoting the Midrash, reached the very opposite conclusion, namely, that the fact that they felt the need to build heavy fortifications around their cities indicates that they were, in fact, weak and fearful.

So, the spies, at every turn, took the negative and pessimistic view. And that is what ultimately led the generation that came out of Egypt to have to wander in the desert for 40 years (see 14:26-30). They lacked that measure of faith which should have convinced them, as princes and leaders of the tribes of Israel, that God never breaks His promise and that, if we pursue the way of faith, God will enable us to overcome all obstacles and resolve all our problems.

The great heroes of later Jewish history achieved the impossible because they thought positively, a positivity rooted in their unwavering faith. This spurred People like Judah Ha-Maccabi, Rabbi Akivah, and many other great Talmudic sages to defy the Roman edicts against teaching Torah in public to ensure the preservation of the nation and its religious values and way of life, and, in the modern age, people like Herzl who was ridiculed for his vision of a Jewish State. In the secular political context, the great gentile campaigners for ethnic equality, like Ghandi and Martin Luther King, by thinking positively, achieved what most others considered impossible.

Taking on challenges and struggling to overcome thorny problems has been second nature to our people. At the end of today's sidrah, we have the portion of tzitzit. Tzitzit are long woollen threads which we purposely knot together to create five knots, from which hang eight single threads. This is the most prominent 'outward sign,' prescribed for Jewish males to display if they wear four-cornered robes, and represented by the small *tallit katan* (miniature tallit) undergarment so that those, like most males today – who don't wear such robes - may still be reminded of that most important biblical precept and its call 'to remember all the mitzvot of the Torah.' Without wishing to be flippant, for me it also symbolises our awareness that being Jewish means learning to live with a constant succession of 'knotty' situations and having to take the rough with the smooth. Our brethren in Israel are truly masters of that philosophy.

There is a joke about the man who used to take his tallit to a Chinese laundry for years, and for which the owner never altered his charge of one pound. When the laundry eventually changed hands, the man brought in his tallit as usual and was mystified when the new owner asked him for eight pounds. When he complained about the hike in price, the laundryman explained that he was still charging him the same one pound for the cleaning, but that the other seven pounds were for unravelling the knots!

That new laundryman could be forgiven, however, for his ignorance of what that combination of tassels and knots symbolises. It teaches that the Jew must accept the knots of life and accept that it is rarely exclusively smooth like the tassels of the tzitzit. If it is so for some, then that is a God-given opportunity for them to help unravel the knots in other people's lives and to lighten their burdens, if not to resolve their problems. This should help augment our own positivity and bring peace and tranquillity of spirit into the lives of others.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Jeffrey