

Those Who Get to Enter the Promised Land Are Those Who Overcome Their Fears

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Abstract: The message of this Torah portion is clear. We must not cave into our fears. We must overcome them. If we want to get the most out of life, if we want to realize our full potential, we must be willing to risk failure and to face the unknown. We must not give in to fearfulness. We must overcome our fears, whatever they may be. Why? Because only those who transcend their fears get to enter the Promised Land.

The title of my teaching tonight is: Those who get to enter the Promised Land are those who overcome their fears. This is the life lesson of *parashat Shelach lekhah*, the Torah portion for this Shabbat.

As the Hebrews reach the northern Sinai desert, about to enter the land of Israel, Moses sends out 12 scouts – one man from each of the 12 tribes – to check out the land of Israel and bring back a report. In today’s parlance, we would say that Moses sent out an advance reconnaissance team. So the scouts move north from the wilderness of Paran, they see the Negev region and climb the Judean hills. Forty days and nights later they return to Moses with their report. As you might expect, they say: we have good news and we have bad news.

Let’s read the good news (Numbers 13:27). The scouts report that the land of Israel is a beautiful land. The metaphor “flowing with milk and honey” means the land is lush and fertile, capable of producing much food.

Now let’s read the bad news (Numbers 13:28-33). The scouts report that the peoples already living in the land of Israel are huge and powerful, and the Hebrews are not strong enough to defeat them.

I think all of us can relate when the Hebrews compare themselves to the Anakites. The scouts think of themselves as little grasshoppers. Haven’t we all had moments when we compared ourselves to someone else and felt very small?

The Hebrews react poorly to the scouts’ report. They panic. They are so freaked out that they say, incredibly, “Let’s go back to Egypt. Let’s go back to slavery.” Now what’s with that? What would drive people to prefer slavery rather than freedom? Yes, it is fear. Fear of what? Fear of the unknown. Of course, freedom is better than slavery. But freedom leads to the unknown. And slavery is familiar.

And where is God in all this? God is disappointed that the Hebrews don't trust that God will help them. God is even more disappointed that the Hebrews don't trust and believe in themselves.

God comes to a new realization. God took the Hebrews out of slavery. But God was not able to take slavery out of the Hebrews. What do I mean by that? The Hebrews operated from a slave mentality. They did not possess the self-respect or the self-confidence or the self-esteem that would be needed to inherit the land of Israel.

So God comes to the realization that the current Hebrew generation was both incapable and unworthy of inheriting the land of Israel. God decides it would be best to wait for the children of the current generation to grow up. Even though it will take 40 years, God reasons that the children, born in freedom, will possess the courage and self-confidence necessary to inherit the land of Israel.

And this is the reason why it took 40 years for the Hebrews to enter the Promised Land. Not because it took 40 years to travel there. And not because Moses, being a typical male, refused to ask for directions!

Our Torah portion teaches how important it is not to give in to our fears, but rather to transcend them. Indeed, just about everyone has a fear about something: some people are afraid of spiders. Others are afraid of failing. Some people are afraid of heights. Others are afraid of intimacy.

Of course, overcoming fears like these is much easier said than done. Nevertheless, the message of this week's Torah portion is clear: We must not cave in to our fears. We must overcome them. If we want to get the most out of life, if we want to realize our full potential, we must be willing to risk failure and to face the unknown.

We must not give in to fearfulness

We must overcome our fears, whatever they may be.

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