



B”H

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Parshah Shelakh: “Very, Very Good”

by Miriam and John Schlackman

Our world abounds with mistreatment of the earth. From climate change and ozone layer depletion to urban sprawl and water pollution, our misuse of resources is stunning. But should we be surprised, when ‘Western’ culture seems so heavily invested in the delusion that personal fulfillment can come from just one more wide-screen TV or SUV?

The good news is that the portion of Shelakh not only gives us the deepest of understanding of what is happening, but also points to how we can get out of this mess! We must start, by taking a step back from these specific ills and look at their underlying cause: mankind’s devastating misunderstanding of the nature of the world itself!

Parshah Shelakh centers around the idea of coming into the Promised Land. “Spies” are sent ahead of the Children of Israel to preview the land which has been promised as our eternal inheritance. Ten of the twelve spies bring back terrifying reports of a cruel land of undefeatable enemies.¹ Only two spies, Kaleb Ben Yefunah and Yehoshuah Bin Nun, come back with a different report: “No”, they tell us, “The land is not what you think!” They tell us that the land is not only “very good” but is very VERY good—Tov Meod MEOD.²

In order to unpack this statement, we must consider the greater meaning of coming into the land; ‘Le-hikanes l’aretz’. On the one hand, the portion is speaking literally about the land of Israel, the expanse of territory that the Jews will inherit.

In a larger sense, however, the act of “coming into the land” refers to something that transcends spatial boundaries. Our role in the world is to fulfill our true human potential, to recognize, and thus to reveal of the glory of HaShem’s creation. For the whole land is full of G-d’s glory; ‘*Melo Kol Ha’Aretz Kevodo*’. Remember that the Hebrew word for reveal, *Galeh*, shares the same essential root-letters, ג and ל, as the word *Geulah*, meaning deliverance. The word *geulah* carries many shades of meaning. Chief among them is the idea of “redemption from exile”, both physically (returning to the Holy Land from foreign exile) and and spiritually (the removal of our blindness so that we can see G-d’s radiance). Our role in revealing (*Galeh*) the true wonder and majesty of HaShem’s creation is thus linked inextricably with our physical deliverance (*Geulah*).

Too often we ignore this essential truth. This is the same mistake made by the 10 negative spies in Shelakh. They failed to see the goodness in the land, and adopted the attitude that the World (i.e. the

¹ See Numbers 13:27-29 and 31-33

² Numbers 14: 7

land) was essentially bad. They, like us, could have fulfilled their true potential in the world and seen its beauty, but instead made a mockery of it: “We’ll never make it”, they wailed, “Let’s just give up, and go back to Egypt!”³

The consequence of this attitude, for the spies, was their downfall. The consequence for us is the wanton environmental destruction we see around us. If we don’t see the world as being good, what motivation do we have to want to protect it?

Furthermore, the kind of behavior advocated by today’s widespread “consume-your-worries-away” mentality stems from *yeush*, despair, which says: “If there is a true meaning of the world, we will never know it; and maybe there isn’t one at all! Maybe the world is only inert matter that exists to be exploited for our fleeting satisfaction”.

But the Torah goes on to belie this attitude. After the catastrophe of the spies, the whole generation is banished to die in the wilderness for their inability to grasp the true nature of the world. Suddenly, the Torah leaps to a new topic: how the *korbanot*, (the temple offerings of joy and celebration), will be made WHEN we enter the land.⁴

In other words, although we may err, despair, fail and have no idea how we are to set things right, the ultimate promise of fulfillment is not withdrawn. The ultimate nature of reality, the Torah affirms, is one of ultimate joy, celebration and gratitude. Fulfillment waits for us to wake up and live up to our potential, as knowers of HaShem, and recognizers of the true wondrous nature of G-d’s world.

On the sixth day of the creation of the world, HaShem says of the completed work of Creation, “Very good.”⁵ To the positive spies, the land was not just ‘very good’ but was ‘very VERY good. The Torah is hinting to us that in some way, the fulfillment coming from our “entering into the land”, in every sense, is better, richer and deeper than the fulfillment that HaShem experienced when he looked out on the new, pristine creation.

The Sforno⁶ tells us that the sixth day of creation is called “very good”, instead of simply “good”, like all the other days, because it is the *tachlit*, the completion and coming to fruition of all the other details that came into being before it. But this fruition is not the final fruition. What it lacks is experiential knowledge. When the world was created, we hadn’t eaten from the forbidden fruit or built the Golden Calf, let alone caused the *Beit Mikdash* (the Temple) to fall or pumped toxic waste into our waterways! It is only as creation stumbles and staggers to its maturity and we gain for ourselves, experientially, the knowledge that Kaleb and Yehoshuah had: the world is indeed very, VERY good.

The Sforno’s explanation also explains why the 10 negative spies failed to recognize the land for what it was. The Torah tells us that all of the spies walked the length and breadth of the barren Negev to

³ This was the lament of the Israelite audience to the spies. See Numbers 14:10

⁴ Numbers 14 outlines the punishment of the spies and the Children of Israel. Numbers 15 begins “The Lord spoke to Moses saying: Speak to the children of Israel and say to them: When you arrive in the Land of your dwelling place, which I am giving you...” (translation on www.chabad.org)

⁵ Genesis 1:31

⁶ Ovadiah ben Jacob Sforno, Italian scholar and commentator, 13th-14th cent. Commentary on

Hebron, where only Kaleb visited and supplicated at the Cave of Machpelah, the burial place of Adam and Eve, Sarah and Avraham, Itzakh and Rivkah, and Yaakov and Leah.⁷

The 10 negative spies did not recognize the significance of this place. Their report is like the attitude of a person who looks only at the shell of the world, its outer nature, without stopping to see what is buried underneath. Such a person blunders through life without looking outside of his/her box, just following the behavior of those around them. They try to wash down their underlying unease at the barrenness they see with careless over-consumption and mistreatment of the earth's resources, without stopping to ask, "What is this place, really? Why am I really here? What have I really been longing for all along?"

Kaleb, on the other hand, did recognize the deeper significance of what was before him. His and Yehoshua's positive reports are the words of those who looked into the world and saw not the terrifying giants⁸ that are before them, but the inner nature and beauty of the world back to the original source of Creation. This is what Rebbe Nachman means when he states, in *Lekute Mohoran*, that we must look for the "*Sekhel she-be-kol-davar*" - the innate Divine wisdom and radiance that lies at the heart of, and animates, every tiny piece of the created world.⁹

The hidden message in the words of Kaleb and Yehoshuah might just be the answer to today's environmental woes. If we could only realize and recognize that inner nature of the world like the positive spies, we would be naturally, irresistibly compelled to live our lives in a way that respected HaShem's creation, especially treating with love and awe the natural resources we have the privilege of using.

As said earlier, the juxtaposition of the story of the spies and the instruction for the *korbanot* reminds us not to despair at what we have done so far to the planet. Although the damage we have done requires bigger and more urgent solutions each day, it is never too late for us to wake up. It is never too late to change our behaviors, both personally and nationally.

Humanity's lack of understanding of its role in the world and its relationship to HaShem is at the core of the problems facing our planet. Like the spies, all that is required of us is to recognize and internalize that HaShem's creation is indeed very **VERY** good.

Suggested Action Points:

The week's Parshah reminds us of the importance of using the world's resources at an appropriate level and to live in a way that respects that everything in the world is created by HaShem and is not just good but is **VERY** good! Practically there are many ways in which we can apply this to our lives on a daily basis.

- **Think before you buy**

Before buying anything, think about how it was made and what resources went into making it and how it got to the store.

⁷ This is according to Rashi, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaky, an 11th cent. French scholar, based on the Talmud

⁸ This is one of the negative things that the ten other spies reported seeing. See Numbers 13:33

⁹ Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, Ukraine, (1772-1810), Likutei Moharan 1.

- Was it transported across the planet? Are more locally produced alternatives available?
- Does it contain non-renewable resources, such as hardwood?
- Does it seem like the best possible use of the resources which HaShem created?

- **Reduce – Reuse – Recycle:**
 - **Firstly Reduce:** Before buying anything, ask if you really need it! How will this product help me to fulfil my purpose in the world?! Am I just buying it to keep up with the Goldbergs down the street?
 - **Secondly Reuse:** If I do need the item, can I reuse something I already have instead? Can I repair instead of replacing?
 - **Thirdly Recycle:** If I have to buy something new, can it be recycled after use? Can I buy an item which is, itself, made from a recycled material?

- **Travel:**

Travel uses a large proportion of the world's energy resources to move us around the globe. Before you make that trip, ask if your journey is really necessary. Can I use technology to avoid making the trip, such as shopping online or calling instead? Can I walk to the shops instead of driving? If I can walk to shul on Shabbos, why do I insist on driving there on a weekday?!

Miriam Schlackman lives, learns and loves Torah at a deep level. She has a Masters degree in Jewish Studies and another, pending, in Jewish Education. She is a committed environmentalist. You can read more articles by Miriam Schlackman on her blog, Al Yad Ha Emet: <http://alyedeiemet.blogspot.com/>

John Schlackman has been involved with Canfei Nesharim almost since its formation. He organised a number of our Shabbatonim and was our 'man in England' before getting married and moving to Israel last year. He currently serves as webmaster for our website www.canfeinesharim.org

John and Miriam have the privilege of living in Jerusalem with their wonderful 8 month old son, Yitzhak Avraham.