

SHELACH-LECHA: SELF-PERCEPTION AND PRIDE

Numbers 13 (derived from *The Message* translation)

1-2 God spoke to Moses, saying: “Send men to scout out the country of Canaan that I am giving to the People of Israel. Send one man from each ancestral tribe, each one a tried-and-true leader in the tribe.”

3 So Moses sent them off from the Wilderness of Paran at the command of God. All of them were leaders in Israel, one from each tribe...

17-20 When Moses sent them off to scout out Canaan, he said, “Go up through the Negev and then into the hill country. Look the land over, see what it is like. Assess the people: Are they strong or weak? Are there few or many? Observe the land: Is it pleasant or harsh? Describe the towns where they live: Are they open camps or fortified with walls? And the soil: Is it fertile or barren? Are there forests? And try to bring back a sample of the produce that grows there” It was the season for the first ripe grapes.

21-25 With that they were on their way. They scouted out the land from the Wilderness of Zin as far as Rechov toward Levo-Chamat. Their route went through the Negev Desert to the town of Hebron. ...Descendants of the giant Anak lived there.. When they arrived at the Eshcol Valley they cut off a branch with a single cluster of grapes—it took two men to carry it—and slung it on a pole. They also picked some pomegranates and figs. They named the place Eshcol Valley (Grape-Cluster Valley) because of the huge cluster of grapes they had cut down there. After forty days of scouting out the land, they returned home.

26-27 They presented themselves before Moses and Aaron and the whole congregation of the People of Israel in the Wilderness of Paran at Kadesh. They reported to the whole congregation and showed them the fruit of the land. Then they told the story of their trip:

27-29 “We went to the land to which you sent us and, oh! It does flow with milk and honey! Just look at this fruit! The only thing is that the people who live there are fierce, their cities are huge and well fortified. Worse yet, we saw descendants of the giant Anak. Amalekites are spread out in the Negev; Hittites, Jebusites, and Amorites hold the hill country; and the Canaanites are established on the Mediterranean Sea and along the Jordan.”

30 Caleb interrupted, called for silence before Moses and said, “Let’s go up and take the land—now. We can do it.”

31-33 But the others said, “We can’t attack those people; they’re way stronger than we are.” They spread scary rumors among the People of Israel. They said, “We scouted out the land from one end to the other—it’s a land that swallows people whole. Everybody we saw was huge. Why, we even saw the Nephilim giants (the Anak giants come from the Nephilim).

We looked like grasshoppers to ourselves, and so we must have looked to them.”

וַנְהִי בְעֵינֵינוּ כַּחֲגָבִים וְכִן הָיִינוּ בְּעֵינֵיהֶם...

Ruach Acheret—Ruach Hakodesh/ Different Spirit—Sacred Spirit

(by Rabbi Camille Shira Angel from *Torah Queeries*, excerpted)

Parashat Shelach tells the story of twelve scouts... The scouts return with a mixed message. While they are enraptured by the possibilities that the land holds for them, ...they are also terrified by the seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

The heavy residue of slave mentality veils the spies' ability to see their own strength and the Divine shield. We do not know what the Anakites think of the Israelites, only what the insecure Israelites think of themselves. Feeling small and powerless, they internalize this deprecation, and it takes a whole new generation before they are able to realize their power.

There are many problems when we judge ourselves through the eyes of others, especially those with an agenda for suppression. "*V'chen hayinu b'eneichem*"—"and we must have looked like grasshoppers in their eyes, too." In the Hasidic commentary *Itturai Torah*, the rabbis say that it was a sin for the spies to use those words.

Why? The rabbis continued, if you look at imposing people and say that you feel like a grasshopper, that is a reasonable thing to say because it is based on your feelings. But when you say, "We must have looked like grasshoppers in their eyes," the *Itturai Torah* chides, "What difference should it make how we appeared to them?" What possible good is there in being concerned about how you appear in others' eyes?

...Perhaps the "sin"—"*avon*," of the ten spies was to acquiesce to fear and lose sight of their authentic power. Internalizing a sense of inferiority, the Israelites lost confidence and became vulnerable to the inner voice of self-doubt and denigration. They felt paralyzed to move forward.

...Like the Israelites, who were damaged by the effects of the negative reports, so we LGBT people have absorbed and internalized the historical, pervasive, and deeply embedded negative messages of homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism. It is no wonder that many of us worry about being abnormal or would choose invisibility and try to pass as heterosexual—and that many Jews consider "fixing" their noses, taking on anglicized names, and making efforts to pass as gentiles. We have received a strong message, that it is dangerous to be like our own people and therefore different from the norm.

It is also very difficult to be true to ourselves and our uniqueness when the ways we are different from the dominant culture have been labeled as deviant, disgusting, and dangerous. When literature, history, books, art, movies, and television show a multifaceted, positive vision of the dominators and a single, negative vision of the dominated, then a person growing up female, of color, lesbian or gay, and the like has to work against the entire culture in order to develop a sense of pride and wholeness.

Caleb and Joshua were the two optimistic spies who God determined each had a *ruach acheret*, a "different spirit." As long as queers are not grasshoppers in our own eyes, we can use this passage to cultivate within ourselves "a different spirit," the spirit that brings with it the intrinsic qualities of compassion, courage, and perseverance.

As Jews, we take inspiration from our primary narrative about crossing the boundary between slavery into freedom. As queers, our experiences of wrestling the giants without and within help shape not only our memories of the past but also our actions in the present and our visions for the future. We celebrate the certain knowledge that our *ruach acheret*, our different spirit, coupled with our inherent *ruach hakodesh*, our sacred spirit, can be our guide on the individual and collective journey toward transformation.