



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

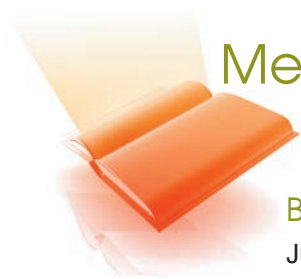
BAMIDBAR > Shelach

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June 16, 2012

Shelach

How Far is Too Far?



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Who has not been faced with the following predicament: You get into a serious conflict with a close friend, and you aren't sure whether you should sever ties. What line, if any, must be crossed before cutting off from a loved one? When hurt or betrayed, how far is too far? Is there a point of no return?

Or the other way around: Your loved one is terribly angry at you for a good reason and is not inclined to reconcile. How much should you push before giving up? Should you ever give up?

The same question can be asked about any idea or project that we believe in: When faced with setbacks and difficulties, is there ever a point when we should give up and try something new? How do we know when an obstacle is only a challenge to be overcome, or a sign that this initiative is not worth pursuing?

Finally, we can ask the same of our relationship with God: Is there a point where our connection can be so compromised that there is no room for reconciliation?

This sermon finds the answer in the analysis of this week's Torah reading - which documents one of the greatest tragedies in our history, the slander of the spies - and proposes a formula for figuring out where lies the line we should never cross.

HOW FAR IS TOO FAR?

1. Marital Woes (Joke)

A husband seriously offended his wife, but being a kind-hearted woman, she eventually forgave him.

Overjoyed that he wouldn't be visiting the divorce court after all, and appreciating at last how fortunate he was to have her, the husband offered up his thanks to God ... which led to the following exchange:

-He asked God, "Why did you make her so kind-hearted?"

-God responded, "So you could love her, my son."

-“Why did you make her so good-looking?”

-“So you could love her, my son.”

-“Why did you make her such a good cook?”

-“So you could love her, my son.”

-The man thought about this. Then he said, "I don't mean to seem ungrateful or anything, but ... why did you make her so stupid?"

-“So she could love *you*, my son.”

2. Common Predicament

Who has not been faced with the following predicament:

Your loved one is terribly angry at you for a good reason and is not inclined to reconcile. How much should you push before giving up? Should you ever give up?

Or the other way around:

You get into a serious conflict with your spouse or a close friend, and you aren't sure whether you should sever ties. What line, if any, must be crossed before cutting off from a loved one? When hurt or betrayed, how far is too far? Is there a point of no return?

The same question can be asked about any idea or project that we believe in: When faced with setbacks and difficulties, is there ever a point when we should give up and try something new? How do we know when an obstacle is only a challenge to be overcome, or a sign that this initiative is not worth pursuing?

Finally, we can ask the same of our relationship with God: Is there a point where our connection can be so compromised that there is no room for reconciliation?

And, indeed, this is the subject of this week's Torah reading, which documents one of the greatest tragedies in our history.¹

3. Scouting the Land

Moses sends the leaders of his generation to scout out the land of Israel and prepare the way for its conquest. But the scouts return with a terrifying report, "slandering" the land and inciting the entire nation against marching onward to the Promised Land. "We cannot go forward ... they are too strong for us," it is a "land that consumes its inhabitants."²

Despite God's repeated promises going back to Abraham that the Jewish people would enter the Promised Land, these "leaders" announce that the land is impossible to conquer.

Their frightening words traumatize the entire nation, causing them to sob and demand that they return to Egypt.³ This becomes the first tragic Tisha B'Av - the first of many to come⁴ - leaving an entire nation weeping helplessly because of their fears.

When Joshua and Caleb insist that the land can be conquered, and the people should go forward as planned, they turn on them, ready to kill them.⁵

¹ Numbers 13:1-14:39.

² Numbers 13:31-32.

³ Numbers 14:1-2.

⁴ Talmud, Taanit 29b.

⁵ Numbers 14:10.

4. God Had Enough

At this point God has had enough and He declares:

“How long shall this nation continue to provoke Me? How long will they not believe in Me, despite all the miracles that I have done among them?”⁶

What is the meaning of the two statements: 1) “How long shall this nation continue to provoke Me?” and 2) “How long will they not believe in Me?” What is the difference between provoking God and not believing in Him? Once the nation provoked God, why the need to add that they also do not believe in Him?

The 18th century founder of the Chassidic Movement, the Baal Shem Tov, explains that until now, though the Jews provoked God several times, they were not deserving of punishment. However, once they made it clear they did not believe in Him, the situation changed, for faith means connection and now the connection has been broken.⁷

In other words:

As long as the connection with God is intact, you can provoke and challenge Him, with no risk of harm. But once you sever your connection with God, once you stop believing in Him, then you are on your own, vulnerable and defenseless to outside forces.

5. The Grave Sin of the Scouts

The grave sin of the scouts was not in the fact that they gave a harsh report about Israel – after all, their mission was to scout out the land and accurately report back what they saw, in order to determine how best to conquer the land. Their serious offense was that they did not suffice with the report, but they went beyond their mission and came to a conclusion: that we cannot conquer the land. They questioned the very premise of God’s promise and came to their own conclusion.

⁶ Numbers 14:11.

⁷ *Keser Shem Tov*, section 267.

And by doing so, the scouts incited the entire nation to question their faith in God! This is what angered God.

Conversely, Caleb and Joshua did not disagree with the facts in the ground that the other scouts reported. They did not argue and claim that there were no powerful “giants” and formidable challenges in the land. They simply declared that, by believing in God and connecting with His strength, we can overcome any challenge:

The land through which we passed is a very good land. If God is satisfied with us ... He can give it to us, a land flowing with milk and honey. But don't rebel against God! Don't be afraid ... God is with us, so don't be afraid.”⁸

The scouts, on the other hand – and the nation they instigated – rejected not just the challenge, but God Himself. And that is a line that cannot be crossed:

By denying God's promise and allowing their own fears to get in the way, the scouts and the children of Israel in effect disconnected themselves from the very power that would allow them to face any challenge, no matter how formidable.

6. Bound Above

Chassidim say, “When you are bound above, you do not fall below.”

Life is difficult and challenging. We do indeed live in a world that is harsh and cruel, one that can “consume its inhabitants.” But we do not come alone and unarmed. We were sent to earth by God, empowered with the strength and promise that we can and will prevail over any complication that comes our way. But this strength is directly linked to – and predicated upon – our faith and connection to God.

⁸ Numbers 14:7-9.

When we are stuck in a pit overwhelmed by difficulties, we cannot solve the problem alone. “One in fetters cannot release himself,” the Talmud teaches.⁹ By connecting to God, we attach ourselves to a force beyond ourselves that helps pull us out of the pit. We all know that life is difficult and challenging. Yet, belief in God means that we have the power to face and overcome every difficulty. We therefore must never ask the question if we can do it, we must only ask *how*.

7. Defying God

By defying God, the children of Israel violated the very purpose for which they and we were created – the very mission that God gives each human being by sending each of us down to earth.

By losing their faith in God they undermined the most essential need in life – the connection with God that imbues us with confidence that we can face all life’s challenges.

When our faith and trust in God erodes, or is lacking, then the forces around us begin to look formidable. The sign that the scouts had lost their faith is evident from their words: “We were in our own eyes like tiny grasshoppers, and so were we in their eyes.”¹⁰ When the scouts saw themselves as “insects,” then the giants around them also saw them that way. The scouts themselves exposed their own weakness – not that they truly could not conquer the land, only that they *thought* they could not do it, and of course that became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

⁹ *Berochos* 5b.

¹⁰ Numbers 13:33.

8. True Protection

Ironically, in their insistence to protect themselves (from “a land that consumes its inhabitants”), the scouts ended up destroying their true protection. Because after all is said and done, it is God that created the land, and it is God who commanded the people to enter it, thereby giving them all the power and protection they would need to not only survive but to thrive.

In the final analysis, what protects us in this world is a deep faith in the Divine, and the power that God endows us to face all the challenges of life.

Conversely, when we have faith, even if at times we may provoke God and behave inappropriately – as long as the connection is there, we have the power to repair, heal and prevail.

9. Forgiveness

The fascinating thing is that, despite the scouts fall, Moses did recognize that God’s love is still intact, and he therefore was able to prevail upon God to forgive the people:

“With Your great love, forgive the sin of this nation, just as You have forgiven them from [the time they left] Egypt until now.”

And God answered: “I will grant forgiveness as you have requested.”¹¹

But this forgiveness was not for those that had sealed their own fate by disconnecting from God’s power. As a result, almost the entire nation born into slavery, including Moses, would end up perishing in the desert, never to enter the long-sought Promised Land.

Joshua and Caleb, by contrast, would. Their faith and trust in God gave them the absolute confidence that they could overcome any obstacle and enter the land, as promised by God.

¹¹ Numbers 14:19-20.

10. Never Disconnect

With regard to our relationship with God, we must always know that it is this fundamental and unwavering connection that allows for our survival. So even when the relationship may be strained ... even when we may have provoked God and behaved inappropriately ... even when we may have serious grievances against God (for allowing the Holocaust, for instance) ... we should never disconnect.¹²

We can scream and yell, question and challenge – but we must never forget that it is our very faith that will give us the strength to forge ahead, to be resilient and to prevail over the harshest difficulties.

11. A Formula

Let me take this lesson and expand it a bit. For here we have a simple formula for dealing with betrayal and hurt between loved ones:

Love doesn't mean that you have to always agree with your beloved. You may have profound differences and disagreements. You may even provoke each other. But as long as the essential connection is there, you must never give up on each other.

How do you know when a betrayal is real enough to sever the connection? The answer lays in figuring out and establishing if, indeed, you are intrinsically connected to the other person. If there is true love, then no setback should stop you.

The same can be said for your projects and initiatives which might be beset by difficulties. If the project is important enough – not simply because of the amount of money involved, but for a higher cause – then no difficulty should stifle the effort.

¹² Even "Acher" (otherwise known as Elisha ben Avuya) – a person who so provoked and betrayed God that he is called by the derogatory name "other one" – was reprimanded for not "breaking down the door" and retaining his faith/connection. Though heaven had decreed "that everyone can do Teshuva except for 'acher'" (Chagigah 15a) – he still should have insisted, following the law (Pesachim 86b) "fulfill everything the owner tells you to do, expect (if he tells you to) leave" (Reishis Chochma, Shaar HaKedusha, chapter 17).

12. Never Give Up

You may be upset and disturbed. But always hang on – never hang up. For as long as the connection is still there, you will be fine.

Let me close by telling this inspirational story from the Holocaust, related by Yaffa Eliach in the *Chassidic Tales of the Holocaust*.

At one of the death camps, the prisoners were suddenly ordered to evacuate their barracks at point of a gun. Pandemonium broke loose. Prisoners stampeded out into big open field. There were two huge pits in the middle of this field.

A cruel voice came over the loudspeaker: “Each of you dogs who values his miserable life and wants to cling to it must jump over one of the pits and land on the other side. Those who miss will get what they rightfully deserve... death!”

It was clear to the inmates they would end up in the pits. Even at the best of times, it would have been impossible to jump over the pits much less on this cold, dark night in the Ukraine. The prisoners standing at the edge of the pits were skeletons, feverish from disease and starvation, exhausted from slave labor and sleepless nights. It was life or death for them, but for the guards it was just a game.

Among them was Rabbi Israel Schapiro, the Blozhiver Rebbe, and a friend, a young philosopher from a large Polish town. They had met in the camps and a deep friendship had developed between them. The philosopher said “All your efforts to jump over the pits are in vain. We only entertain the Germans. Let’s just sit down in the pits and wait for the bullets to end our wretched existence.”

“My friend,” said the Rabbi, “Man must utilize every opportunity to live. So my friend, jump we must.”

As they neared the pits they could see them rapidly filling up with bodies. When they reached them, the Rabbi closed his eyes and commanded in a powerful whisper, “We are jumping!” They jumped, and when they both opened their eyes, they found themselves standing on the other side of the pit.

“We are here, we are here, we are alive!” the Rabbi’s young friend repeated over and over again, while warm tears streamed from his eyes. “Tell me, how did you do it?”

“I was holding on to the coattails of my father, and my grandfather and my great-grandfather, of blessed memory,” said the Rabbi. “Tell me, how did you do it?”

The young philosopher replied, “Rabbi, I was holding on to you.”¹³

Hold on – hold on to your rich tradition, hold on to the Torah, hold on to God. And, ultimately, you will see a happy ending. Amen.

¹³ Adapted from *Hassidic Tales of the Holocaust* by Yaffa Eliach.