



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

BAMIDBAR > Shelach

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Shelach

Making Aliyah



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

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ABSTRACT

What is the source and root of aliyah? What can it teach us about our lives and about Israel?

Every Jew must make aliyah – that is, in the broad sense of the word to never be satisfied wherever he/she might be and always ascend higher. Aliyah today is the term used to describe immigration to Israel, which is part of our destiny – to ultimately elevate ourselves to the level of “Israel.” But even if presently one isn’t immigrating, we should all be striving for spiritual aliyah – a state of constant elevation.

As the Jews prepare for their first aliyah to Israel (aloh naaleh), the story of the spies/scouts in this week’s Torah portion teaches us this lesson: true purity and purpose is not found in the shielded protection of the wilderness, but in overcoming the challenges and obstacles of the Promised Land.

There is a reason we will fight for this Land even though it’s easier to remain in the wilderness. That reason is: the Land teaches us that our heights are limitless.

So long as we get out of our own way.

MAKING ALIYAH: IS IT WORTH IT?

1. Born And Bred (Joke)

Abe was visiting Israel for the first time. As soon as his plane landed, he got a taxi to take him to his hotel. The taxi driver was very friendly and told Abe all kinds of useful information.

Then Abe asked the driver, "Say, is Israel a healthy place?"

"Oh, yes, it really is," the driver answered, "When I first came here, I couldn't say even one simple word, I had hardly any hair on my head, I didn't have the energy to walk across a small room, could not control my bodily functions, and needed assistance just to get out of bed every day."

"That's a remarkable story, truly amazing," Abe said. "So how long have you been living in Israel?"

"I was born here."

2. Aliyah = Ascent

Israel is, without a doubt, a land that heals. For those who were born in the Holy Land, Israel can surely teach them to walk and talk.

For those who were not born in the miraculous country of Israel, a country that heals and rejuvenates, there is a process called aliyah. Literally meaning "ascent," aliyah is a biblical term referring to the ascension one makes to the Holy Land in general and to Jerusalem specifically.

Today, aliyah is the term used to describe immigration to - or up to - Israel. (When someone leaves Israel, that is called yeridah, literally "descent.")

The idea of aliyah, of ascension to Israel, is found in the Torah. Every Jew, in his or her heart of hearts, desires to ascend to the Holy Land. We

pray for this dream to become a reality (at least) three times a day. We even face Israel as we pray.

This desire is not merely a physical one. We are not merely seeking to arrive at a certain geographical location on the map. Rather, the essential idea of aliyah is that we desire to ascend upward, raise ourselves higher and beyond, to a more refined spiritual level that is represented by the Holy Land of Israel.

What can aliyah teach us about ourselves, about Israel, and about God? How does aliyah embody the *raison d'être*, the very purpose of existence itself?

The answers lie in the first ever aliyah in the history of the world, about which we read today.

3. Parshat Shelach

Entitled Parshat Shelach, meaning, “send,” our Torah reading opens with Moses sending twelve spies/scouts, one from each tribe, to reconnoiter the Land, gather information on its inhabitants and cities, and report back accordingly in order to know which is the best way to enter and conquer the land.

The Nation of Israel had a mission – to enter the Promised Land, establishing a bastion of peace in a world of conflict, a lighthouse in a raging, stormy sea, a menorah of illumination in a world of darkness, a home for the Divine in this here material wilderness.

As with any mission, the first step required is acquainting oneself with the objective, scouting out the marketplace, learning its nature and characteristics, and determining which steps to take to achieve the said goal.

To this end, Moses sent out the scouts, an advance crew of elite intelligence officers.

When the scouts returned from their mission, ten of the twelve gave a rather bleak report, stating that Israel is indeed a land flowing with milk

and honey but, they said, “it cannot be conquered by us – the inhabitants are too big and we are too small.”

Only Joshua and Caleb kept the faith. When Caleb heard the other ten scouts speak negatively about the Land, he responded: “We can surely go up (aloh naaleh) and take possession of it, for we can indeed overcome it.”¹

But the others interrupted him: “We are unable to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we are (mimenu).”²

It was a simple case of self-doubt, insecurity, and lack of confidence. We are unable...they are stronger... We simply cannot ascend to Israel.

And they continued: “The land we passed through to explore is a land that consumes its inhabitants...”³

The land itself is all-consuming, they claimed, it will eat us alive. This was an apparent contradiction of their previous praises of the land, implying that the land itself was dangerous and not only its inhabitants.

4. Additional Details from the Talmud

While the narrative in the Torah itself is pretty sparse – surely much commotion and discussion, heated debated and back-and-forth was going on –thankfully the Talmud fills in some of the details.

When Caleb stated, “We can surely go up (aloh naaleh) and take possession of it, for we can indeed overcome it,” the Talmud says that he added:

Even to heaven: if he [Moses] tells us, “Make ladders and go up there,” we will succeed in whatever he says.⁴

¹Numbers 13:30.

²Numbers 13:31.

³Numbers 13:32.

⁴Sotah 35a.

To which the scouts responded: “We are unable to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we are.” And once again the Talmud adds detail:

An egregious statement did the spies/scouts make at that moment, “For they are stronger than we are (mimenu)”⁵- read not than we are (mimenu) but, rather, than He is (Mimenu), as if even the Landlord (i.e. God Himself) cannot remove His furniture from there (i.e. cannot possess His own house, the Promised Land).

This is an egregious statement indeed. According to the Talmud, when the spies said, “We are unable to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we are,” they were really saying, “We are unable to go up against the people, for they are stronger than He is,” stronger than God Himself!

One last elaboration from the Talmud:

In speaking of the land’s impenetrability and its risks, the scouts said that it “is a land that consumes its inhabitants.”⁶ But the Talmud states that God perceived this idea of a consuming land as a positive, while the scouts perceived it as a negative. God saw it as positive because it consumed the leaders of the region right before the scouts got there, so as to distract the mourners from recognizing new travelers. But the scouts perceived this as negative, for the land itself was consuming its inhabitants – wherever they went, they saw funerals!

5. Confusing and Perplexing

This Talmudic explanation is very confusing, and it highlights another perplexity that confronts us in these Torah verses: We all know that the generation of the wilderness was very lofty and holy, and the scouts were leaders of their respective tribes. How then is it even feasible that

⁵ I.e. the Holy One Blessed Be. The Hebrew word mimenu may refer to us, the spies, or may refer to God Himself.

⁶ Numbers 13:32.

they would doubt God and state that we cannot ascend into the Land?! God had promised the Jewish people for generations that they would inherit the Land of Israel, so how could these people of faith doubt Him and His promises?!

And not just doubt God, but slander God. “We are unable to go up against the people, for they are stronger [than God Himself].” How could these holy Jews ever think this? How could they believe that even the Landlord cannot enter into His own home to remove His own furnishings? It seems downright blasphemous.

And what distinguished Caleb and Joshua from the others? What gave them such complete confidence in God and Moses, stating they would even build ladders and ascend to heaven if that’s where they were told to ascend?

What is going on here?

6. Psycho-Spiritual Explanation

In the mystical texts,⁷ the grand practitioners of holiness and teachers of light explain this story as the story of all our lives:

The wilderness was like heaven – there was manna, Clouds of Glory, miracles and comfort. In the desert the Israelites did not have to work and toil for their sustenance, for everything rained down from above.

The Jewish people did not want to leave this comfort zone. They were living in a spiritual oasis, protected in a divine “womb” as it were, had everything they needed and did not want their kids influenced by outside negative force.

When the scouts saw that the Land of Israel was indeed a voluptuous land, one that was flowing with milk and honey, they got frightened. This was a new reality – a material reality, not just spiritual. They real-

⁷See Likkutei Torah, Shlach; Likkutei Sichot vol. 4, pp. 1041-1049.

ized that in the Land they would have to work for their bread, engage with the earth and all its lowly and mundane accompaniment.

They thought this challenge would be too difficult for them to endure. It would take hundreds of years to tame and actualize the potential stored in the Holy Land. They said, “It’s too risky. And why leave our comforts for a land that seems to devour us? Materialism consumes its inhabitants – as we so often sadly see – why the need to engage with a mundane world when we can stay here protected in the spiritual environment of the Sinai desert”?

They also said, “Even the Landlord cannot remove His own furnishings from this place. Selfish materialism and its temptations can be more powerful than the divine. Even God, who desires pure holiness, knows that it is better and easier found in the innocent and sheltered wilderness than in the overwhelming pressures of material life in Israel, where the land, earth and physicality distract from and interfere with the spiritual.”

To which Caleb responded: “God tells us how high we can rise; who are we to question it? If God says you can rise to the greatest heights why should we claim that we can only reach the third floor?”

This was the crux of the problem: The scouts assumed, incorrectly, that God is found only in spiritual domains of the world. Truth be told, the deepest and most essential levels of the Divine are found down below in the material Land, not high above in the Clouds of Glory.

Yes, God in holiness is easy. God in earth, is anything but. The Land does consume, overtake, overwhelm as it entices with its carnalities.

But entering the Land of Israel was not meant to be easy, the same way any worthwhile achievement is not easy. It was not meant to be easy, but it was meant to be meaningful, purposeful – eliciting the power to transform a hostile self-absorbed world into a Holy Land.

7. Taking It Easy

Many people today want things to be easy, just as the scouts did 3,300 years ago. But easy things do not yield serious and productive results. Changing the world is difficult – but worth it. Easy is going on vacation, watching TV, or living in your parents' home and eating your mother's dinner for the duration of your easy (but desperately sad) life.

The Nation of Israelites had a mission: to enter the Land of Israel, establishing a bastion of peace in a world of conflict, a lighthouse in a raging, stormy sea, a menorah of illumination in a world of darkness, a home for the Divine in this material wilderness.

Here's the problem: the scouts wanted it easy. They had no desire to fight for the Land; they would rather have lived in complacent comfort.

We are no different. And, really, who can blame us? We just want life to be easy, enjoyable, calm – we don't want to send our children to battle; after all these years of fighting, we just want to live peacefully and comfortably.

Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, we don't always get what we want. But the answer to difficulty is not to turn away from the challenge – from the Land – and abandon it. The answer to difficulty is to take on and rise to the challenges, conquer the difficulties and turn the Land into a thriving divine garden.

The Jews not only lacked confidence in themselves but they also lacked confidence in God. How could they say: Even the Master of the House cannot enter to remove His furniture?!

As a matter of fact the entire purpose of creation is to ascend to a level that is beyond the norm; not to be holy only in yeshiva or synagogue, but also to be holy everywhere and in everything.

The question is not whether but how. Not whether we can enter the Land; the question is: how are we going to enter the Land. We are entering, that's not up for discussion.

8. Personal Lesson

Every single person has two parts to his/her journey,⁸ our comfort zones and early years, when we are protected and nurtured by our parents and homes. And when we mature and enter the Promised Land.

The Sinai desert represents the comfortable places we never want to leave, where the manna feeds us effortlessly, where we are surrounded with and protected by the Clouds of Glory, where we don't have to work to earn and don't have to sweat to achieve.

In our daily personal lives these are the times of prayer and Torah study, the devout moments when everything is Godly and the holy. In such times, we feel shielded and protected, for all is divine and there is nothing besides.

However, after being trained and building our resources, then we grow up and are charged with entering the material world, into our work-days, paying bills, dealing with obnoxious bosses or clients, then we can indeed be, as the scouts feared, "consumed by the land," we can be overtaken by the materialism and superficialities of life.

To which Caleb said: "Aloh naaleh," true ascent, doesn't mean being comfortable in the synagogue or studying peacefully in yeshiva; rather true aliyah is to enter the Land, work it, cultivate matter and transform it into spirit. True aliyah happens when you leave the comfort of the wilderness for the challenges of the Promised Land.

Then, the Land won't consume you. Indeed, you will consume it, you will use it as fuel to feed your spiritual growth and divine service. And the land will consume anyone (and any challenge) hindering your holy path.

9. How Would I Know? (Joke)

Rabbi Rabinovitz, a world-class Talmudic logician, is on his way from New York to Israel to visit his daughter who made aliyah. He arrives at

⁸ See Likkutei Sichot ibid p. 1046.

JFK and waits in line to check his luggage for El AL flight #613.

“Has anyone put anything in your baggage without your knowledge?” asks the stern looking security guy with wraparound sunglasses.

“Tell me,” says Rabbi Rabinovitz. “If it was without my knowledge, how would I know?”

10. No Excuses (Conclusion)

In Torah law, an innocent who does not know something is often unaccountable for that which he or she does not know.

Not knowing what Israel is on an essential level, is a valid excuse. But when a Jew knows exactly what the essence of Israel represents, and knowing it, nevertheless, he wishes to remain in his comfort zone in the wilderness and not be bothered with the challenges, which were and are the very reason he was born in the first place – well, for that there is no excuse.

As Caleb said, “Aloh naaleh,” we are born to ascend, to reach the highest we can reach. Even if Moses told us to build ladders ascending heavenward, we would build ladders ascending heavenward. We have no limits. Nothing is impossible The Creator of the World stated explicitly that we aren’t bound by our comforts and we are meant to enter the Promised Land.

When we have this attitude, then the Land will not consume us. Instead, it will consume anything standing in our way.

With great ability comes great responsibility. It is the great ability and great responsibility of every single Jew to make him or herself knowledgeable of what the Land of Israel is all about, and what it truly means to make aliyah, to ascend to a place where (in addition to the heavenly and spiritual) the Land itself, earth itself, is holy and divine.

This week’s Torah portion teaches each of us how to achieve aliyah – elevation – in our lives: not by escaping to a sacred mountain, but by

refining and sanctifying our material involvements. When you eat a meal, make a blessing and focus your thoughts on using the energy gained by the food for constructive purposes.

The same with your home, workplace, vacation place, every meeting and trip you take – turn them into opportunities to share kind and inspiring words with people you meet. Turn every interaction into a meaningful and spiritual experience.

Turn your raw material corner of the world into a Holy and Promised Land.

And then surely we shall all ascend to the Holy Land and upon the Holy Mountain, as the Prophet Micah envisioned it:

And many nations shall go, and they shall say, “Come, let us go ascend the Lord's mount and to the house of the God of Jacob, and let Him teach us of His ways, and we will go in His paths,” for out of Zion shall the Torah come forth, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.⁹

May this happen before we begin our Musaf prayer so that we may offer the Musaf offering in our Holy Temple. Amen!

Shabbat Shalom!

⁹ Micah 4:2.