



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

BAMIDBAR > Shlach

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

July 2, 2016

Shlach

Angels or Grasshoppers?



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

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ABSTRACT

Low self-esteem is a very real issue today. It affects virtually every aspect of our lives. Parents and educators seek ways to build the self-esteem of their children and students. Fathers and mothers comfort children with low self-esteem; teachers confront students who lash out because of confidence issues. Adults themselves fill voids of self-worth with gadgets and toys, and often with more destructive activity.

Ten of the twelve scouts whom Moses sent into the Promised Land to reconnoiter the area reported that they saw themselves as “little grasshoppers” and the inhabitants of the land as “giants.”

The Midrash wonders why they did not see themselves as angels, as divine messengers on a holy mission? Why did the spies see themselves as lowly bugs? What did they lack in self-esteem?

The mystics explain: When one lives in one’s own head, one concocts all kinds of illusions. The antidote to this is action.

A story with a twist, involving a dialogue between a homeless boxer and a lovesick young man, knocks this message right home, into our promised homeland! And reveals for us the lessons of this Parsha on how to build self-esteem today.

Today, more than ever, we are in need of a strong self-esteem, especially as Jews, and specifically as we reel from the latest tragic loss of Hallel Yafa Ariel, murdered by a terrorist in her bed in Chevron...

ANGELS OR GRASSHOPPERS: THE JEWISH DEFINITION OF SELF

1. Baseball Player (Humor)

A little boy was overheard talking to himself as he was playing baseball in the garden.

“I’m the greatest baseball player in the world,” he said proudly. Then he tossed the ball in the air, swung and missed.

Undaunted, he picked up the ball, threw it into the air again and said to himself, “I’m the greatest player ever!” He swung at the ball and again he missed.

He paused to examine the bat and the ball carefully. Then once more he threw the ball in to air and said, “I’m the greatest baseball player who ever lived!” He swung the bat hard and again he missed the ball.

“Wow!” the little boy exclaimed. “What a pitcher!”

2. The Issue of the Day

One of the key challenges of a rabbi, including myself, is to ensure not to speak about subjects that are esoteric and divine and mired in cryptic verses and abstract ideas. Rather, it is critical to speak in terms that are personally relevant to all of us.

Today, I want to touch upon a very relevant and sensitive subject, one that is near and dear to all of our hearts. That is the subject of self-confidence. We all are concerned with building healthy self-esteem and developing a perception of self that is strong and empowering.

The clever little pitcher in this anecdote is a good example of what we can do to nurture ourselves in such a way that a perceived weakness (inability to hit the ball) is, instead, experienced as a real strength (amazing pitching ability)!

Today, perhaps more than ever before in our illustrious history, we Jews have the luxury and wherewithal to explore such issues. Our grand parents were busy running from pogroms and expulsions, so they had bigger worries. When one is busy dealing with self-preservation, self-esteem isn't exactly the most pressing matter. Indeed, their self-esteem may have been intact precisely because they didn't have so much free time to think about it.

But today it is.

With all the challenges that the issue brings, we must be cognizant of the blessing it implies. Today we are free from oppression. We have the ability to protect ourselves. In Israel we have an army and the power to do what it takes to defend ourselves from enemies. Today, our challenges are about self-esteem and spiritual survival ... about building Jewish families and communities whose members have a healthy sense of self and divine self-confidence.

With all the gifts we were blessed with today, we are challenged suffering, especially in Israel, from lack of self-esteem and resolve. Today, more than ever, we Jews are in need of a strong self-esteem - so glaringly obvious as we reel from the latest tragic loss of Hallel Yafa Ariel, murdered by a terrorist in her bed in Chevron...

Time has come to stand up firm, proud and strong - with an unwavering gaon Yaakov - and declare that enough is enough. We will do whatever it takes to not allow such atrocities to take place.

Are we up to the challenge?

It is an age-old question perhaps first posed when a group of twelve cloak-and-dagger spies came to scout out the Promised Land 3327 years ago. Unfortunately, only two of the spies had supreme confidence, seeing themselves as messengers of G-d, while the other ten lacked self-esteem, seeing themselves as little grasshoppers.

3. Parshat Shlach

This tale of the spies is told in today's Torah portion – *Parshat Shlach*.

As our reading begins, the Jewish people are about to fulfill their purpose of entering the Promised Land. Moses sends twelve men – one from each tribe of Israel – to recon the land. Upon returning, ten of the twelve are most pessimistic. We cannot conquer the land, they declared. It is too powerful for us. A portion of their filed report is strangely worded:

*There we saw the giants, the sons of Anak, descended from the giants. In our own eyes we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we were in their eyes.*¹

First of all, why did ten of the twelve spies describe themselves as little grasshoppers? G-d had sent them on a mission to the Holy Land, so should not have they felt empowered, like giants themselves, setting out on their divine mission?

Secondly, how did they know that the giants perceived them as grasshoppers? Perhaps the giants saw them as something else altogether?

4. The Midrash

The Midrash asks the very same question:

When they said, *In our own eyes we seemed like grasshoppers*, the Holy Blessed One said, "I am fine with that." However, when they said, *and so we were in their eyes*, He asked: "Do you know how I made you look in their eyes? Who says that I did not make you look like angels in their eyes?"²

¹ Numbers 13:33.

² Numbers Rabbah 11:8.

The answer is that within their self-perception lies a very deep truism about the human condition: How you see yourself is how you think the world sees you. It's called projection. When a Jew sees himself as a little grasshopper he thinks the whole world sees him as a little grasshopper as well.³

Because *in our own eyes we seemed like grasshoppers*, we thought that *so we were in their eyes*.⁴

But the question remains: Why indeed did the spies see themselves as grasshoppers? Why indeed did ten of the twelve agents of Moses have low self-esteem and a lack of self-confidence?⁵

Why did they not believe that the giants saw them as angels? And why did they not see themselves as angels?

5. Living In Your Head

The Torah describes the twelve spies as *men of distinction; they were the heads of the children of Israel*.⁶ How is it then possible for the ten of them to perceive themselves as little grasshoppers and to imagine that the world perceives them as grasshoppers as well? How could such great leaders have such low self-esteem? If such men of distinction, heads of Israel, had such low self-esteem, how could there ever be any hope for us?

³ See Igrot Kodesh, vol. 14, #4912 (printed in Likkutei Sichot vol. 28, p. 479). Oztrot Hamaharsha, Introduction p. 17.

⁴ See Sotah 35a for a seemingly contradictory understanding of the verse and Gur Aryeh ad loc for a reconciliatory and comprehensive discussion on this topic. Also Likkutei Sichot vol. 28, pp. 85ff.

⁵ See Talk of Lubavitcher Rebbe 20 Av 5731; Shlach 5733; 2nd day Shavuot 5737; 15 Tammuz 5739.

⁶ Numbers 13:3.

The Chassidic masters explain that “when there’s no action, any convolution is possible.” That is, when you live in your head, out of touch with reality, distortions and illusions are not just possible but inevitable.⁷

The ten spies did not want to go into the Land of Israel. The reason why is actually quite understandable, if not noble. They desired to dedicate their entire beings to heavenly pursuits. They desired to study Torah all day, to analyze divine texts and discuss sublime ideas. This is why they convinced themselves that entering into the Land of Israel would be a distraction.

This is what they told themselves: “In the wilderness, we need not work – our food falls from heaven, G-d guides us, we are handed everything on a silver platter. In the Land of Israel, however, all that will end. We will have to work for our bread and pay our bills. In the Land, we will be required to perform physical mitzvoth, and is the physical not a distraction from the spiritual?”⁸

But here’s the problem: When your whole life is cerebral/intellectual/spiritual, when your whole life is devoid of *physical action* – by which you earn your keep, help your neighbor, provide for your family – then you become very insecure. It is no wonder that they saw themselves as little grasshoppers, as tiny limited creatures.

Confidence is acquired and built up by action – by doing, trying, failing, picking yourself up again, and realizing that in the end you will succeed. But if you never try, then your confidence has no foundation and is easily shaken.

When you are busy doing *big* things, you cannot fool yourself into thinking you are *small*. But when you are living in your own head, so to speak, you can tell yourself anything. Because then imagination takes over, and it can be disconnected from tangible reality.

This was the problem of the ten spies. Joshua and Caleb didn’t question their ability to succeed in the Land because they were men of action.

⁷ See Kuntres 12-13 Tammuz 5694, p. 311.

⁸ See Likkutei Sichot vol. 28, pp. 85ff.

They knew that G-d, through Moses, inspired and instructed them to enter into the Promised Land to perform physical acts, and they were ready to go for it. They had stopped living in their own heads. But the others had not.

Today, we have too much time on our hands. And, because we have too many options, infinite resources and limitless possibilities, we run the risk of doing nothing, of living in Lala land, instead of entering the Promised Land and doing what we have to do.

The lesson is: We must act.

Yes, of course, we must study Torah, but we must also implement the Torah we learn. Yes, it is worthwhile to study in yeshiva, wearing out bench after bench. But sooner or later we must act, lest we begin to perceive ourselves as grasshoppers and mistakenly believe that the world sees us as grasshoppers as well.

6. O. Henry Story: The Higher Pragmatism

William Sydney Porter, better known by his penname, O. Henry, was a master of the short story with a moral lesson, though he is probably more famous for his unexpected plot twists. One of his best is called “The Higher Pragmatism” and, apropos our discussion here, it is well worth reading.

I will try to paraphrase it because it gets the message across in a clever way.

So, in the story a lovesick man meets a homeless man in the park. The two end up introducing themselves to each other as Jack (that’s the lovesick man) and as Mack (that’s the homeless man who was once a boxer).

Jack confides in Mack his love for Mildred Telfair and his inability to win her hand. Mildred comes from a wealthy family while Jack is only of modest means. He tells Mack, “My worth is so small, my income so minute, and my fears so large that I haven’t the courage to speak to her of my worship ... in her presence I can only blush and stammer...”

Hearing him out, Mack agrees that he stands no chance with Mildred as long as he sees himself as such an unworthy suitor – as a little grasshopper, we might say.

Mack then tells him a story from his life to illustrate the power of false self-perception.

It seems that in his younger days Mack was quite the amateur boxer. He could lay anyone out flat. But when he was signed for the professional ring, somehow all his self-confidence left him – coming up against big-time professionals he felt as weak as a fly. Having lost all of his backers, he had to quit the game, though he still loved to engage in street-brawls to prove to himself he had what it takes.

One night walking in the Bowery past a group of tuxedoed gentlemen, he finds himself shoved off the sidewalk by one of them. Unable to resist, he punches the fellow and a fight ensues, which he wins hands down. With his opponent lying flat on the pavement, Mack is confronted by the man’s friends, “Do you know what you’ve done?” Mack shoots back a few choice words, only to be told, “You’ve just knocked out Reddy Burns, the middle-weight champion of the world!”

As long as he believed him to be a weak-kneed gentleman, Mack allowed himself to triumph. Had he known who he was fighting, his belief that he could never beat a professional would have ensured he lost.

This is the morality tale that Mack imparts to lovesick Jack, concluding, “That’s what imagination does.”

He then taunts Jack: “You’ll never win out ... I tell you, it’s a park bench for you in this romance business. You’ll lose just like I did cause you’re afraid to go in the ring. Your case and mine are just the same. You’re an amateur and that means you better keep outside of the ropes.”

Jack responds to the taunt. He finds that the homeless man's words keep repeating themselves in his mind, and he resolves, "I'll show him!"

With that he hurries to the telephone booth and promptly calls Mildred Telfair's home. No sooner than a female voice says "Hello" does Jack - whose real name is Phil - blurt out: "You know, of course, that I love you, and that I have been in that idiotic state for a long time. I don't want any more foolishness about it. That is, I mean I want an answer from you right now. Will you marry me or not?"

She accepts his proposal, demonstrating to one and all that self-confidence is all it takes to score a knockout.

Of course, in true O. Henry fashion there is a twist. When Phil arrives at the Telfair residence, he learns that the female voice on the phone was not Mildred but her younger sister Elizabeth, though it seems that he is happy to be getting married just the same.

7. Personal Lesson

What was the difference? What changed Phil's situation? What changed Phil's sense of self, providing self-confidence, self-assurance and self-esteem?

One thing: ACTION. Jack stopped thinking, stopped imagining, and started acting.

The results were unexpected. Pleasantly unexpected.

When we live in our heads, thinking this and contemplating that, anything is possible and getting caught up in our own selves is probable. But when we act righteously there is no doubt; there are no self-esteem issues.

Action breeds and guarantees self-confidence. And self-confidence breeds and guarantees success.

It is necessary to be a thinker. But all that thinking must lead to doing.

Try, do, act and you will hold yourself in the highest esteem. Fail to act, and you will forever remain in the wilderness of abstract thought and thoughtless abstraction.

8. Conclusion

A Chassid once came to the Tzemach Tzedek, the third Rebbe of Chabad, and confided his desire to immigrate to Israel. The Tzemach Tzedek responded “*Mach da Eretz Yisrael – Make Israel here.*” Wherever you are, you have to make it Israel.⁹

Of course, it is a mitzvah to settle and inhabit the Land of Israel.¹⁰ But wherever a Jew may be, a Jew must make that space into an Israel, a land of sublime purpose and G-dly aspiration. Wherever we are – here in this community, or traveling elsewhere on business or vacation – each and every one of us must endeavor to transform that material place into a spiritual Israel.

That requires action. Contemplation is great but contemplation without action leads to a lack of confidence. Action, however, builds self-esteem.

No one ever questions his or her self-esteem after doing a righteous act. You ever see anyone feel insecure while giving charity, while making a blessing? Nope! Act and your confidence and esteem will rise higher. As Caleb, one of the two spies who did the right thing, said to Moses: “*We can surely go up and take possession of [the Land], for we can indeed overcome it.*”¹¹

⁹ Letter of 20 Av 5685 (Igrot Kodesh, Rebbe Rayatz, vol. 1, p. 485ff); Sefer Hasichot 5751, vol. 2, p. 695.

¹⁰ See Likkutei Sichot vol. 2, p. 620.

¹¹ Numbers 13:30.

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Get out of your own head and act, and you will surely go up and take possession of the Land. For you will certainly overcome any and all insecurities. You will not be a little grasshopper then, you will be mightier than a giant, for you will be nothing less than a divine messenger. And when you know that, the world will know it as well.

In Israel today we need that attitude: This is our land. Be proud of it. Don't behave and act like a loser. No need to be apologetic and tentative. Remember the mistake of the scouts: *In our own eyes we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we were in their eyes.* When you see yourself as a grasshopper, others will see you that way as well. When you see yourself as proud and confident – proud in the gift of the Land of Israel given to us by G-d – then others will also perceive you as strong, and will be afraid to attack you.

As we read about the courage of Joshua and Caleb, the courage necessary to enter the Promised Land, may we be blessed with this courage and self-esteem, both individually and collectively, in fulfilling the divine mission given to us.

Shabbat Shalom!