Facing Realities: Thoughts for Parashat Shelah Lekha

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Shelah Lekha

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Moses sent twelve spies, the leaders of each of the tribes of Israel, to go into the Promised Land and come back with a report. All twelve agreed that the land was wonderful but ten of them thought the inhabitants were too powerful to overcome. Caleb and Joshua called on the people to trust the Almighty who would help them conquer the opponents.

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz describes the controversy between the two groups of spies. Ten of them thought the people were better off in the wilderness. Entering the land, after all, would entail war. Settling the land would require hard work—agriculture, building, creating infrastructure etc. In the wilderness, the people were provided with manna from heaven; they had no material responsibilities; they could devote themselves entirely to spiritual matters.

Caleb and Joshua contended that the people could not fulfill their earthly mission unless they took responsibility for establishing their own country. God had freed them from Egypt so that they would become a self-respecting nation. The Torah is meant to be lived in this world, with all its challenges and opportunities.

Rabbi Steinsaltz points out that the argument of the spies can be heard frequently even today. “Why should we lose our abstract spiritual essence, our Torah, and our manna, solely in order to go to the Land of Israel? It is better to remain in the wilderness.” (Talks on the Parasha, p. 306).

The error of the ten spies was that they wanted an other-worldly spiritual perfection, free of the responsibilities of nation-building. Let God provide everything and let us avoid the nitty-gritty of running a society with all the challenges that entails.

Their error is echoed by many today—Jewish and non-Jewish—who expect the people of Israel to be absolutely pure, and who feel that Israel is tainted by having to deal with the everyday issues of war, economics, politics etc. Wouldn’t things be better if Jews stayed in the wilderness seeking spiritual perfection, rather than getting their hands dirty in the real world?

Although Jewish critics of Israel are diverse, they seem to have one thing in common. They insist that the Jewish state be inhumanly perfect. For them, a Jewish state will never be satisfactory as long as Jews have to wage wars, kill enemies, rule over non-Jews, engage in political infighting, deal with social inequalities etc.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935) noted that "the great idealists seek an order so noble, so firm and pure, beyond what may be found in the world of reality, and thus they destroy what has been fashioned in conformity to the norms of the world." Such people, through their unrealistic religiosity or idealism, in fact are part of what Rav Kook called "the world of chaos" rather than "the world of order." Misguided idealism is destructive. Insisting that Jews be "angels" rather than real human beings is also a form of antisemitism.

Already in the 19th century, Rabbi Yehuda Alkalai (1798-1878) lamented that rabbis of his time opposed resettlement of Jews in Israel until Messianic times. He rebuked those "who say with full mouth that Jerusalem was only created for the sake of Torah study. While their intention is acceptable, their deeds are unacceptable. It is impossible to conduct life in this world as though it were the world-to-come, where there is no need to eat or drink."

The approach of the ten spies is still espoused by many today. But just as their error caused massive suffering to the people then, it can cause serious harm to us today. We need to hear the courageous and faithful voices of Caleb and Joshua. Reality is difficult; escapism is far worse.

The future of Israel and the Jewish People will be secured by those who share the dream of a Jewish homeland that strives to be a "light unto the nations." The goal is to make Israel as great as humanly possible, not to demand absolute perfection.

To demand the impossible is not only unrealistic: it is dangerous and self-destructive.