

Parashat Shelakh Lecha
Liberating Ourselves

by Dr. David Shneer on Friday June 23, 2006
27 Sivan, 5766
Numbers 13:1 - 15:41, Shabbat, 27 Sivan 5766

I'm one of those Jews who went to a Hebrew school where we never studied Numbers (*Bamidbar*), or most of Deuteronomy (*Devarim*) for that matter. Hebrew school always ended in May, leaving the lonely second half of Numbers and most of Deuteronomy to the devices of those more devoted to reading the Torah or those, like me, who had a Bar or Bat Mitzvah in the summer. (Yes, we were teased for getting the "boring" portions. Little did we know that the summer portions involve serious death and destruction.)

In some ways I'm glad that I didn't delve too far into Numbers and Deuteronomy as a kid, because to be honest, I don't like most of these parts of the Torah. They include so many tales of God flying off the handle every time his Israelite band shows the slightest sign of doubt about wandering through a desert with no GPS. I had always thought that doubt, questioning and "wrestling with God" were what defined Judaism. The harsh God of these *parshiyot* resurrects all of those ambivalences I feel about Jewish text and tradition, ambivalences that wane when I'm reading the stories of love, romance, good and evil in Genesis and Exodus. And yes, God has some harsh moments in Genesis and Exodus as well, but in those parts of the Torah the harshness is embedded in such compelling drama that it's much easier to take.

This week's portion, "*Shalakh*" (or "Send!") tells the story of the 12 spies, the representatives of each of the 12 tribes whom Moses sends into the purported land "flowing with milk and honey" to scope out the scene. Is there milk and honey? And more important, is there anyone else there who might make it hard for us to enjoy the milk and honey? Upon their return, the spies report that yes, there is milk and honey, but there are also a lot of people there already enjoying it. The spies' description of the Amalekites, Caananites, and a whole array of big, bad desert people makes the Israelites tremble. Caleb, one of the spies, reports back that "we looked like grasshoppers," in comparison to the giants that occupied the land flowing with milk and honey. Needless to say, this incited no small amount of panic.

Inciting panic is a crime in some countries, as it was among the peripatetic Israelites (much better than calling them "wandering Jews"). After hearing the reports of giants who would

undoubtedly slaughter all of the Israelites, many of them simply wanted to return to Egypt, because it was easier. What's hauling around bricks for Pharaoh in the face of certain death? This response did not please God. I can almost imagine God – nostrils flaring, veins bulging – as he hears this hapless band of people question God's divine plan and ask to go back to their lives as slaves. These were the people he had brought out of Egypt, and to top it off, he had given them the Torah – one of the greatest gifts imaginable. And now, they want to throw in the towel.

Why go back? Those of us who usually stop engaging the Biblical narrative around Sinai can't imagine what was so great about slavery, about the metaphoric *mitzrayim*, or narrow place. According to the story, God redeemed Israel, led the Jews out of their narrow place into freedom, and even threw in the Torah to seal the deal. For lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people this story of liberation is so familiar. We relate to the idea of leaving the confines of the perennial closet for greener "freer" fields – of being "out" of the closet. But we can also understand the temptation to "go back" and return to the known, to the safe, to the predictable. Predictability is very appealing. Going forward involves uncertainty, risk and fear.

Shalakh reminds us, and the Israelites, of something very important. The Israelites are told that to have the land promised to them, to experience freedom, they are going to have to conquer it. Why would the Israelites have to conquer land to experience freedom? Although I have issues with the conquest imagery in general, especially the connection between conquest and freedom, I see in *parashat Shalakh* that God is telling the Israelites that for them to be truly free, they can no longer be an object of God's redemption. God freed the Jews; God led them into the desert; God gave them the Torah. God even fed them on their journey. But *Shalakh* tells us that freedom demands that Jews become a subject in the making of their own liberation. Jews' conquest of the land, as scary and potentially awful as it may be, is something Jews have to do. They have to risk something, in this case potential slaughter at the hands of the Amalekites, in order to gain freedom.

It is a reminder that liberation demands action. One cannot, in fact *be liberated*. And the act of liberating oneself is scary and risky. No outside authority, whether it be a state, a synagogue, a family member, or apparently even God, can liberate someone. Liberation demands subjectivity, it demands that people act on their own. Liberation means not simply waiting for those more powerful to make the path easier. Liberation means acting and taking risks, even when we feel like grasshoppers against those more powerful than ourselves.

Hazak hazak ve'nithazek.



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