

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Shelach Lecha
June 5, 2021 *** Sivan 25, 5781

Kol Rina – An Independent Minyan, is a traditional egalitarian community. We are haimish (homey/folksy), friendly, participatory, warm and welcoming. We hold weekly services in South Orange as well as holiday services and celebrations which are completely lay led. We welcome all to our services and programs from non-Hebrew readers to Jewish communal and education professionals.

Shelach Lecha in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2201/jewish/Shelach-in-a-Nutshell.htm

Moses sends twelve spies to the land of Canaan. Forty days later they return, carrying a huge cluster of grapes, a pomegranate and a fig, to report on a lush and bountiful land. But ten of the spies warn that the inhabitants of the land are giants and warriors “more powerful than we”; only Caleb and Joshua insist that the land can be conquered, as G-d has commanded.

The people weep that they'd rather return to Egypt. G-d decrees that Israel's entry into the Land shall be delayed forty years, during which time that entire generation will die out in the desert. A group of remorseful Jews storm the mountain on the border of the Land, and are routed by the Amalekites and Canaanites.

The laws of the menachot (meal, wine and oil offerings) are given, as well as the mitzvahto consecrate a portion of the dough (challah) to G-d when making bread. A man violates the Shabbat by gathering sticks, and is put to death. G-d instructs to place fringes (tzitzit) on the four corners of our garments, so that we should remember to fulfill the mitzvot (divine commandments).

Shelach Haftorah in a Nutshell: Joshua 2:1- 2:24

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/691124/jewish/Haftorah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This week's haftorah tells the story of the spies that Joshua sent to scout the city of Jericho, prior to the Israelites' invasion of the Holy Land, a point in common with this week's Torah reading, which discusses the twelve spies that were sent by Moses years earlier to explore the Holy Land.

Joshua sent two spies to Jericho, where they lodged at an inn located in the city's walls, operated by a woman named Rahab. Their presence was quickly discovered by the king who sent for Rahab and asked her to turn in her guests. Rahab responded that her guests had already left the city — when actually she had hidden them on her rooftop.

"And she said to the men, I know that G-d has given you the land, and that your terror has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land have melted away because of you. For we have heard how G-d dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt; and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites that were on the other side of the Jordan, Sihon and Og, whom you completely destroyed."

At Rahab's request, the two spies assured her that she and her family would not be harmed during the conquer of Jericho—provided that she would tie a scarlet thread and hang it from her window. This would be a symbol that this home is a safe haven. Rahab helped the men escape via a rope she lowered from her window and told them how to hide from possible pursuers. The spies escaped safely and

returned to report to Joshua.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Confidence (Shelach Lecha 5781) by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z”l
<https://rabbisacks.org/shelach-lecha-5781/>

It was perhaps the single greatest collective failure of leadership in the Torah. Ten of the spies whom Moses had sent to spy out the land came back with a report calculated to demoralise the nation.

“We came to the land to which you sent us. It flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. However, the people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large... We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we are... The land, through which we have gone to spy it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people that we saw in it are of great height... We seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them.” (Num. 13:27-33)

This was nonsense, and they should have known it. They had left Egypt, the greatest empire of the ancient world, after a series of plagues that brought that great country to its knees. They had crossed the seemingly impenetrable barrier of the Red Sea. They had fought and defeated the Amalekites, a ferocious warrior nation. They had even sung, along with their fellow Israelites, a song at the sea that contained the words:

**The peoples have heard; they tremble;
Pangs have seized the inhabitants of Philistia.
Now are the chiefs of Edom dismayed;
Trembling seizes the leaders of Moab;**

All the inhabitants of Canaan have melted away. (Ex. 15:14-15)

They should have known that the people of the land were afraid of them, not the other way round. And so it was, as Rahab told the spies sent by Joshua forty years later:

I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that the fear of you has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you. For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two Kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you devoted to destruction. And as soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no spirit left in any man because of you, for the Lord your God, He is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath. (Joshua 2:9-11)

Only Joshua and Caleb among the twelve showed leadership. They told the people that the conquest of the land was eminently achievable because God was with

them. The people did not listen. But the two leaders received their reward. They alone of their generation lived to enter the land. More than that: their defiant statement of faith and their refusal to be afraid shines as brightly now as it did thirty-three centuries ago. They are eternal heroes of faith.

One of the fundamental tasks of any leader, from president to parent, is to give people a sense of confidence: in themselves, in the group of which they are a part, and in the mission itself. A leader must have faith in the people they lead, and inspire that faith in them. As Rosabeth Moss Kanter of the Harvard Business School writes in her book *Confidence*, “Leadership is not about the leader, it is about how he or she builds the confidence of everyone else.”[1] Confidence, by the way, is Latin for “having faith together.”

The truth is that in no small measure a law of self-fulfilling prophecy applies in the human arena. Those who say, “We cannot do it” are probably right, as are those who say, “We can.” If you lack confidence you will lose. If you have it – solid, justified confidence based on preparation and past performance – you will win. Not always, but often enough to triumph over setbacks and failures. That, as mentioned in our study of parshat Beshallah, is what the story of Moses’ hands is about, during the battle against the Amalekites. When the Israelites look up, they win. When they look down they start to lose.

That is why the negative definition of Jewish identity that has so often prevailed in modern times (Jews are the people who are hated, Israel is the nation that is isolated, to be Jewish is to refuse to grant Hitler a posthumous victory) is so misconceived, and why one in two Jews who have been brought up on this doctrine choose to marry out and discontinue the Jewish journey.[2]

Harvard economic historian David Landes, in his *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*, explores the question of why some countries fail to grow economically while others succeed spectacularly. After more than 500 pages of close analysis, he reaches this conclusion:

In this world, the optimists have it, not because they are always right, but because they are positive. Even when wrong, they are positive, and that is the way of achievement, correction, improvement, and success. Educated, eyes-open optimism pays; pessimism can only offer the empty consolation of being right.[3]

I prefer the word “hope” to “optimism.” Optimism is the belief that things will get better; hope is the belief that together we can make things better. No Jew, knowing Jewish history, can be an optimist, but no Jew worthy of the name abandons hope. The most pessimistic of the Prophets, from Amos to Jeremiah, were still voices of hope. By their defeatism, the spies failed as leaders and as Jews. To be a Jew is to be an agent of hope.

The most remarkable by far of all the commentators on the episode of the spies was the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson. He raised the

obvious question. The Torah emphasises that the spies were all leaders, princes, heads of tribes. They knew that God was with them, and that with His help there was nothing they could not do. They knew that God would not have promised them a land they could not conquer. Why then did they come back with a negative report?

His answer turns the conventional understanding of the spies upside-down. They were, he said, not afraid of defeat. They were afraid of victory. What they said to the people was one thing, but what led them to say it was another entirely.

What was their situation now, in the wilderness? They lived in close and continuous proximity to God. They drank water from a rock. They ate manna from heaven. They were surrounded by the Clouds of Glory. Miracles accompanied them along the way.

What would be their situation in the land? They would have to fight wars, plough the land, plant seed, gather harvests, create and sustain an army, an economy and a welfare system. They would have to do what every other nation does: live in the real world of empirical space. What would become of their relationship with God? Yes, He would still be present in the rain that made crops grow, in the blessings of field and town, and in the Temple in Jerusalem that they would visit three times a year, but not visibly, intimately, miraculously, as He was in the desert. This is what the spies feared: not failure but success.

This, said the Rebbe, was a noble sin but still a sin. God wants us to live in the real world of nations, economies and armies. God wants us, as He put it, to create “a dwelling place in the lower world.” He wants us to bring the Shechinah, the Divine Presence, into everyday life. It is easy to find God in total seclusion and escape from responsibility. It is hard to find God in the office, in business, in farms and fields and factories and finance. But it is that hard challenge to which we are summoned: to create a space for God in the midst of this physical world that He created and seven times pronounced good. That is what ten of the spies failed to understand, and it was a spiritual failure that condemned an entire generation to forty years of futile wandering.

The Rebbe’s words ring true today even more loudly than they did when he first spoke them. They are a profound statement of the Jewish task. They are also a fine exposition of a concept that entered psychology only relatively recently – fear of success.[4] We are all familiar with the idea of fear of failure. It is what keeps many of us from taking risks, preferring instead to stay within our comfort zone.

No less real, though, is fear of success. We want to succeed: so we tell ourselves and others. But often unconsciously we fear what success may bring: new responsibilities, expectations on the part of others that we may find hard to fulfil, and so on. So we fail to become what we might have become had someone given us faith in ourselves.

The antidote to fear, both of failure and success, lies in the passage with which the

parsha ends: the command of tzitzit (Num. 15:38-41). We are commanded to place fringes on our garments, among them a thread of blue. Blue is the colour of the sky and of heaven. Blue is the colour we see when we look up (at least in Israel; in Britain, more often than not we see clouds). When we learn to look up, we overcome our fears. **Leaders give people confidence by teaching them to look up. We are not grasshoppers unless we think we are.**

[1] Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Confidence*, Random House, 2005, 325. [2] National Jewish Population Survey 1990: A Portrait of Jewish Americans, Pew Research Center, October 1, 2013.

[3] David Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*, London, Little, Brown, 1998, 524.

[4] Sometimes called the “Jonah complex” after the Prophet. See Abraham Maslow, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1977, 35-40.

Mediating Between the Divine and the Human: The Prophets Other Central Role Shelach Lecha 5781 by Rabbi Yitz Greenberg

https://mechonhadar.s3.amazonaws.com/mh_torah_source_sheets/GreenbergParashatShelach5781.pdf?utm_campaign=Dvar%20Torah%205781&utm_medium=email&_hsmi=130891391&_hsenc=p2ANqtz-_wXCqp9YsjkxVuyo1iVLDoiMa8WpcOCfLBP0T_TI5xJU8jJrt9_XIGkpe-3j64jYHwmQbu0TUwGT3pUw_legXIG8sg&utm_content=130891391&utm_source=hs_email

Most people see that the prophet’s important and primary role is to serve as the deliverer of God’s messages and spokesperson for the Divine.¹ Our *parashah*—together with the Yitro narrative of the Sinai entrance into the covenant—highlights a second no less vital role: to represent the people to God, and to urge God to behave in accordance with the covenant. In our *parashah*, this second role made the difference between life and death for the people and the prophet.

In the runup to accepting the Sinai covenant, the Torah gave many hints that entry into the *berit* was fraught with danger for both sides. The Infinite Divine energy had been willed by God to be contained within the laws of nature which sustain the universe in the first universal covenant.² But the pent up covenantal energy was so explosive that contact between the Divine and the human had to be limited, shielded to flow safely through special people or places. Now, the Divine was to further self-reduce to come closer to the people of Israel. But that concentrated energy had the potential to overflow, or be driven by anger, and harm the Israelites. Hence, the warnings to the people not to come too close or to touch the mountain lest they die (Exodus 19:12-13, 21-22; 20:15-16).

The danger on the Israelites’ side was that the people might not be able to live up to such a commitment or act dependably by covenantal guidelines. They might have violated—or even forfeited—their commitment, endangering themselves. In this way, accepting the *berit* had the possibility of being detrimental to their health. The prophet Moses made Sinai acceptance possible. Frightened by the thunder,

lightning, and the high voltage energy surrounding them—and afraid of death—the people turned to Moses and asked him to be their shield and receiver, which he agreed to do (Exodus 20:15-18; Deuteronomy 5:19-28). The prophet stepped in between God and the people and took responsibility for the behavior of both. This allowed both partners to enter into the covenant and not be deterred by fear of hurting or being punished by the other.

In the spies fiasco of our *parashah*, marked by breakdown and death, the greatest prophet of all, Moses, again plays the prophet-protector role. “God would destroy them had not Moses, His chosen one, stood before Him in the breach, to turn away His wrath” (Psalm 106:23). The intensity of this mediator role—and the prophet’s total commitment in putting himself on the line to do it—is made even clearer when we read the way the spies’ mission goes to pieces in light of the narrative of the Golden Calf, the other great crisis of the Sinaitic people and covenant. After that event, out of disgust with their acts of idolatry, God was determined to wipe out the Israelite nation and replace it with Moses and his family (Exodus 32:10-14; 30-34). Without hesitation, Moses said to God (in my paraphrase): “If You intend to destroy this people, You will have to kill me first. I will not accept Your offer to become an alternate covenant nation. I will not leave my people behind—not even to go with You.”³

This direct confrontation stopped the divine anger in its tracks. Going forward, Moses worked on the people, teaching and grooming them to function in the *berit*. When they complained unjustifiably and decided that manna from heaven wasn’t good enough (Numbers 11:4-6), when they demanded food and tidbits (like in the good slavery menu!),⁴ Moses rebuked them. Yet, with God’s help, he sought to give some response to satisfy them. Later, when the spies returned from Canaan with their report to go ahead to the land of milk and honey, despite its formidable challenges, the people panicked and wanted to retreat and regress (14:1-4). Moses stood up and urged them to act on their trust in the past record of liberation (Deuteronomy 1:30-31). He steadfastly argued, urged, insisted—up to the point where he is confronted by an out-of-control mob ready to stone him and Aaron to death (Numbers 14:10).

It turns out that the threat to the prophet’s life was always more from the people. Again, God offers to wipe the ever-backsliding Israelites out and replace them with Moses and his family (14:12). But Moses once more puts his life on the line to stop the Divine anger. He turns to persuade the Lord to be forgiving in the face of bad behavior under such aggravated circumstances. He presses God to forgive this outrageous, sinful behavior. He evokes God’s covenantal commitment to forgive, to be compassionate and gracious, to hold back the anger and overflow with covenantal love (14:13-19).

On the night of the confrontation over the spies’ mission, Moses goes through the same drill as at the Golden Calf episode. He again makes clear that he will never

abandon the people, not even to get an assured place in God's plan for the future. He again argues that God's representative in the world is bound up with His people. He appeals to God's covenantal self-description and asks the Deity to hold steadfastly with the covenant and with the people. When the Divine dooms the Exodus generation to die in the desert (14:21-23)—which obviously threatens Moses' animating dream of entering the Land of Israel—he says not a word of censure for this penalty. He tries to get the people to reconcile with the decree and go forward as best as they can.⁵ When the people try to wriggle out of the Lord's decree, and flip flop from instant retreat to immediate conquest (14:40), he patiently and firmly tries to get them not to set out on a futile and self-destructive campaign to enter into the land of Canaan. He continues to educate the people to grow up and act responsibly, even as he continues to wrestle with God to stay with the covenant and move forward with the people.

Of course, the whole episode ends disastrously. The impulsive entry campaign is squashed by local tribes (14:45). The decree of doom is passed. Nevertheless, thanks to Moses, the worst outcome, the harshest Divine intention—to wipe out the Israelites—is not consummated.

In this *parashah* (as at the Golden Calf), Moses holds up the banner of a religious role model and leader. The prophet is ready to give his life for the people. To be religious is to be ready to give one's life for others—not to seek exemptions from danger on the grounds of being devoted to Torah. The prophet does not simply judge the people in God's name. The religious leader brings the people's needs and concerns to God and, sometimes, asks for different instructions. The prophet does not lay the blame on the people, and he will stand with them and even take punishment with them as he tries to sustain them through failure or loss of nerve. At the same time, the prophet is not just a paragon, but rather is very human. Moses also gets thrown and flustered, angry and depressed, from time to time. The mediating, double-mission prophet is not just put before us to be on a pedestal. The prophet is held up as a human being of great spirit and courage, to be imitated and followed in our own lives.

Shabbat Shalom.

¹ See Reuven Kimelman's masterful treatment of this prophetic role in "Prophecy as Arguing with God and the Ideal of Justice" in *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, 2014, vol. 68 (1), pp. 17-27. Kimelman's Torah has influenced me and shaped me for many decades. ² This covenant is spelled out in Genesis 8:21-22; 9:9-17. For the requirement of God's self-limitation in forming covenant, see my essay on Parashat Noah, "Covenant," available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/covenant>. ³ "And now if you will forgive their sin, and if you will not [let the people live], wipe me out of your book" (Exodus 32:32). ⁴ They talk about the cucumbers, leeks, garlic, melons, fish, and meat that they used to eat in Egypt! ⁵ This includes raising the next generation to take responsibility and take on the task of conquering a homeland.

Numbers chapter 15, having set forth instructions for how to atone for unintentional sins, next turns its attention to deliberate transgressions (30–31):

But the person who transgresses with a high hand, whether native or sojourner—he reviles the Lord, and that person shall be cut off from the midst of his people. For he has shown contempt for the word of the Lord [devar adonai bazah], and God's commandment he has violated. That person shall surely be cut off, his crime is upon him.

In the biblical context, “has shown contempt for the word of the Lord” clearly means intentionally and brazenly violating one of God’s commands. But rather typically, the rabbinic tradition attributes several different meanings to the phrase (BT Sanhedrin 99a). Here are among the alternatives offered for what constitutes “contempt for God’s word”:

- Saying "There is no torah [i.e. instruction] from Heaven”
- Epicureanism [for the Rabbis, one who denies divine providence]
- One who exposes [presumably, to public derision] certain facets of the Torah
- [Rabbi Meir's view]: One who studies Torah but does not teach it to others
- [Rabbi Nehorai's view]: One who has the time and ability to delve into Torah study but does not do so
- [Rabbi Ishmael's view]: One who engages in idolatry

But the definition of “contempt for God’s word” that is most far-reaching, and thus most raises the eyebrows, is this:

An alternative teaching [tanya ideikh]: Contempt for God’s word applies even to one who concedes that the whole Torah comes from Heaven, but makes an exception for one particular verse of the Torah, saying that the Holy One did not pronounce that one verse, but rather Moses did so on his own. Moreover, even one who makes no exception for any of the verses in the Torah but does make exception for one or another grammatical inference, or logical deduction, or gezerah shavah, [1] saying that they are of human origin—such a person has shown contempt for God’s word.

This expresses a stunningly maximalist and far-reaching point of view that, although it is brought here as “another teaching,” became all too mainstream in Jewish thought through the ages, to our own day. The idea is this: What makes inferences and deductions valid is not that they are the products of sound human reasoning, but rather because they have been transmitted to us by authoritative texts or teachers. This is a form of what is called *fideism*, the doctrine that faith is far more the guarantor of ultimate truth than is human reason.

A particularly crisp example of this is found in a “confession” by the late Rabbi

Aharon Lichtenstein, who was the head of the Har Etzion Yeshivah in Gush Etzion. In it, he recalls how in his teenage years certain biblical passages troubled him greatly because they seemed so clearly unethical. He specifically mentions the command to annihilate every last Amalekite indiscriminately. But then he remembered something about the venerated Rabbi Chaim of Brisk. It was said that women who gave birth to unwanted children knew that they could leave those children at night on the doorstep of Reb Chaim's house, and that they would be taken in and cared for. Lichtenstein wrote:

I then recalled having recently read that Rabbi Chaim Brisker would awaken nightly to see if someone hadn't placed a foundling at his doorstep. I knew that I slept quite soundly [i.e., not worrying about the woes of others], and I concluded that if such a paragon of hesed coped with these laws [e.g., the annihilation of the Amalekite children], evidently the source of my anxiety did not lie in my greater sensitivity but in my weaker faith. And I set myself to enhancing it.

Build faith, and trust in it, rather than in the sensitivity born of one's reasoning. But in sharp contrast to this, consider a remarkable contemporary midrash that takes issue with the rabbinic interpretation of a biblical law that in its own way sacrifices children on the altar of religious piety and fealty. It is the law of *mamzerut*, a biblical injunction that, according to rabbinic understanding, stigmatizes for life as ineligible for marriage a child whose conception was the result of a severe sexual infraction by its parents. What makes this midrash especially remarkable is that it was written by an Orthodox woman, Rivkah Lubitch, who has standing in rabbinic courts in Israel to advocate for women's rights.^[2]

There are five who weep over mamzerim, and those tears make their way to God's Throne of Glory. They are:

- *The mamzer whose status is known to all*
- *The mamzer who alone is aware of his mamzerut*
- *The woman who knows that her child is a mamzer*
- *The father who cannot make himself known to his own child as his father, without revealing a status that the child does not know*
- *The woman who aborted her fetus because she knew it would be born a mamzer*

And some add a sixth who weeps: that very fetus that was never born, who cries out each day and says, "Mommy, mommy, why did you not give birth to me?"

Tanot^[3] was asked this question: What does God do when a mamzer is born and the community brands him or her for life—and for subsequent generations—as such? And she answered as follows: "At such moments, God cries out with a loud wailing: 'These things you are doing in My name never entered My mind; they never entered My mind.'"^[4]

Noteworthy here is that by saying that the biblical verse, or even just the rabbinic interpretation of it "never entered God's mind," the condemnation of the "alternative

teaching” must inexorably follow: it is contempt for God’s word!

Perhaps the strongest contrast, however, to the “alternative teaching” and to Lichtenstein’s fideism appears in a brief story that Martin Buber told about a conversation he had with a deeply observant Jew. They were discussing the story of the prophet Samuel telling King Saul that he has lost God’s favor for not having completely annihilated Amalek. Buber said that he was unable to accept this as a message from God. His interlocutor challenged him with a fiery glance and said “What do you believe then?” And Buber said “I believe that Samuel has misunderstood God.” And then the story continues in this perhaps unexpected way: *The angry countenance opposite me became transformed, as if a hand had passed over it, soothing it “Well,” said the man with a positively gentle, tender clarity, “I think so too.”* (“Autobiographical Fragments,” *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*)

Portrayed here is a man who was tortured by two beliefs: (i) that it was his religious duty to believe that everything in scripture was the word of God, and (ii) that Saul received an unfair punishment for having shown mercy and not cruelty. But then came Buber’s suggestion that one did not have to believe that God commanded cruelty; instead, consider that we humans can misunderstand God. That explains why the strain in the face of Buber’s acquaintance became relaxed and at ease. God was “off the hook” and did not have to be thought of as making unethical demands.

One can follow the “alternative teaching” and ascribe every passage—even those that offend our moral intuitions—to the divine will, or we can recognize that fallible humans writing of God may mistake the intentions of the God of goodness and mercy. And so, the stark question poses itself: Which of these is truly to invite contempt for God’s word?

[1] An inference that starts with different occurrences of the same word, and then transfers contextual details from one occurrence to another. The standard rabbinic view reflected here is that these all go back to Sinai and cannot be initiated on one’s own authority. [2] Lubitch is the daughter of Professor Charles Liebman z”l, a Visiting Professor at JTS. The midrash was published in *Dirshuni*, Vol 2 (Yediot, 2018) [3] Tanot is the imagined spirit of Jephthah’s daughter, who lost her life because of her father’s blind insistence on fulfilling a rash and ill-conceived vow. [4] In *Jeremiah 19:5*, God uses these exact words to denounce religious piety that entails the sacrificing of children. (*Gordon Tucker is the Bice Chancellor for Religious Life and Engagement at JTS*)

[Choose Hope: The Story of Coach Ted Lasso and the Biblical Caleb](https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/choose-hope-story-coach-ted-lasso-and-biblical-caleb) [by Rabbi Alex Kress](#)

<https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/choose-hope-story-coach-ted-lasso-and-biblical-caleb>

In the first episode of *Ted Lasso*, the title character played by Jason Sudeikis tapes a poster above the entrance to his office. It reads simply, “Believe.” The character is a small-town American football coach hired to lead a British soccer club, which

Sudeikis describes as “Mr. Rogers meets John Wooden.” The problem is that Coach Lasso knows nothing about soccer and was intentionally hired by the club's nefarious owner to tank the team. Undeterred by the challenges, he perseveres to spread optimism and hope.

In the story of the spies from this week's parashah, Sh'lach L'cha, we find the Torah's version of Ted Lasso. Moses sends 12 men, one from each tribe, to scout the land of Canaan. They are tasked with finding out how many people live in the land, if the soil was rich for farming, and if their towns were fortified. After 40 days, the men return downtrodden

Though the land is flowing with milk, honey, and enormous clusters of grapes that take two people to carry, the spies deliver Moses and the Israelites a grim picture: The land is full of inhabitants, some so large they make the spies look like grasshoppers. Their cities are fortified and there is no chance the wandering Israelites can make the land their home. At this news, the people weep loudly, (railing against Moses: “If only we had died in the land of Egypt” (Numbers 14:2) However, one spy had a different experience. “Caleb hushed the people before Moses and said, 'Let us, by all means, go up, and we shall gain possession of it, for we shall surely overcome it'” (Numbers 13:30). Caleb's optimism and confidence stood in stark contrast to the cynicism of the other spies. While they expressed reservations and fear, Caleb expressed hope and faith. The text tells us that Caleb has a ruach acheret – a different spirit – that appears influential. A few verses after Caleb exudes positivity, another spy, Joshua, joins in and implores the Israelites to have faith. The 15th-century commentator Isaac Abarbanel teaches that while Joshua had a prophetic spirit that would later inscribe him in the canon, Caleb “had merely a human spirit.” Caleb, like Ted Lasso, was just a can-do guy

Yet the story of Caleb and Ted Lasso is not only about their gift of optimism; it is that they made choices. Caleb, like Ted, could have been weighed down by cynics but instead chose to spread light rather than darkness. Caleb, like Ted, could have kept silent in the face of such negativity but instead chose to speak up. Caleb, like Ted, could have let the despondent undermine their faith but instead chose to believe in themselves, the people around them, and in things unraveling in the way that they were meant to unravel.

As Coach Lasso sets up his office in that first episode, he hangs a few iconic sports photos whose subjects inspire him: Muhammad Ali towering over Sonny Liston, the “Miracle on Ice” at the 1980 Winter Olympics, Buster Douglas knocking out Mike Tyson, Coach Jim Valvano winning the 1983 NCAA Tournament. These moments embody the ruach acheret (different spirit) of Caleb: Muhammad Ali speaking out against the war in Vietnam and losing his boxing license; a group of amateur American hockey players beating the professional Soviet Union team; heavy underdog Douglas knocking out Tyson; the unbridled optimism of Coach Jimmy V facing down a deadly cancer diagnosis to implore the world, “Don't give up. Don't

ever give up.” These figures became legends because of the spirit they brought to the moment, a choice we are all capable of making in moments big and small. Though we might not always have the positive disposition of Ted Lasso or the boundless courage of Caleb to offer hope in the face of adversity, we do control what we say and how we act. We can hold grudges and be petty or we can forgive. We can let challenges stop us in our tracks or we can find a way to persevere. We can spread kindness and hopefulness or we can drag others down.

When we find ourselves at a crossroads and faced with a choice, Caleb and Ted Lasso both teach us to believe in ourselves, in others, and in the possibility that things might just work out for the best. *(Rabbi Alex Kress (he/his) is the incoming rabbi of Beth Shir Shalom in Santa Monica, CA.)*