

Kol Rina  
*An Independent Minyan*  
Parashat Shelach Lecha  
June 25, 2022 \*\*\* Sivan 26, 5782

Shelach Lecha in a Nutshell

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/2201/jewish/Shelach-in-a-Nutshell.htm](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](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

### Assembling Reminders: Shelach Lecha by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/shelach-lecha/assembling-reminders/>

Imagine the following: You are driving ever so slightly above the speed limit. You see a police car in your rear-view mirror. You slow down. You know perfectly well that it is wrong to exceed the speed limit whether anyone is watching or not but, being human, the likelihood of being found out and penalised makes a difference. Recently a series of experiments has been conducted by psychologists to test the impact of the sense of being observed on pro-social behaviour. Chenbo Zhong, Vanessa Bohns and Francesca Gino constructed a test to see whether a feeling of anonymity made a difference. They randomly assigned to a group of students either sunglasses or clear glasses, telling them that they were testing reactions to a new product line. They were also, in an apparently unrelated task, given six dollars and chance of sharing any of it with a stranger. Those wearing clear glasses gave on average \$2.71, while those wearing sunglasses gave an average of \$1.81. The mere fact of wearing dark glasses, and thus feeling unrecognised and unrecognisable, reduced generosity. In another experiment, they found that students given the opportunity to cheat in a test were more likely to do so in a dimly lit room than in a brightly lit one.[1] The more we think we may be observed, the more moral and generous we become.

Kevin Haley and Dan Fessler tested students on the so-called Dictator Game, in which you are given, say, ten dollars, together with the opportunity of sharing any or none of it with an anonymous stranger. Beforehand, and without realising it was part of the experiment, some of the students were briefly shown a pair of eyes as a computer screen saver, while others saw a different image. Those exposed to the eyes gave 55 per cent more to the stranger than the others. In another study researchers placed a coffee maker in a university hallway. Passers-by could take coffee and leave money in the box. On some weeks a poster with watchful eyes was hanging on the wall nearby, on others a picture of flowers. On the weeks where the eyes were displayed, people left on average 2.76 times as much money as at other times.[2]

Ara Norenzayan, author of the book *Big Gods*, from which these studies are taken, concludes that “watched people are nice people.”[3] That is part of what makes

religion a force for honest and altruistic behaviour: the belief that God sees what we do. It is no coincidence that, as belief in a personal God has waned in the West, surveillance by CCTV and other means has had to be increased. Voltaire once said that, whatever his personal views on the matter, he wanted his butler and other servants to believe in God because then he would be cheated less.[4] Less obvious is the experimental finding that what makes the difference to the way we behave is not simply what we believe, but rather the fact of being reminded of it. In one test, conducted by Brandon Randolph-Seng and Michael Nielsen, participants were exposed to words flashed for less than 100 milliseconds, that is, long enough to be detected by the brain but not long enough for conscious awareness. They were then given a test in which they had the opportunity to cheat. Those who had been shown words relating to God were significantly less likely to do so than people who had been shown neutral words. The same result was yielded by another test in which, beforehand, some of the participants were asked to recall the Ten Commandments while others were asked to remember the last ten books they had read. Merely being reminded of the Ten Commandments reduced the tendency to cheat.

Another researcher, Deepak Malhotra, surveyed the willingness of Christians to give to online charitable appeals. The response was 300 per cent greater if the appeal was made on a Sunday than on any other day of the week. Clearly the participants did not change their minds about religious belief or the importance of charitable giving between weekdays and Sundays. It was simply that on Sundays they were more likely to have thought about God. A similar test was carried out among Muslims in Morocco, where it was found that people were more likely to give generously to charity if they lived in a place where they could hear the call to prayer from a local minaret.

Nazorayan's conclusion is that 'religion is more in the situation than in the person,'[5] or to put it another way, what makes the difference to our behaviour is less what we believe than the phenomenon of being reminded, even subconsciously, of what we believe.

That is precisely the psychology behind the mitzvah of tzitzit in this week's parsha of Shelach Lecha:

This shall be your tzitzit and you shall see it and remember all the Lord's commandments and keep them, not straying after your heart and after your eyes, following your own sinful desires. Thus you will be reminded to keep all My commandments, and be holy to your God.

Num. 15:39

The Talmud (Menachot 44a) tells the story of a man who, in a moment of moral weakness, decided to pay a visit to a certain courtesan. He was in the course of removing his clothes when he saw his tzitzit and immediately froze. The courtesan asked him what the matter was, and he told her about the tzitzit, saying that the

four fringes had become accusing witnesses against him for the sin he was about to commit. The woman was so impressed by the power of this simple command that she converted to Judaism.

We sometimes fail to understand the connection between religion and morality. Dostoevsky is reputed to have said that if God did not exist, all would be permitted.[6] This is not the mainstream Jewish view. According to Rabbi Nissim Gaon, the moral imperatives accessible to reason have been binding since the dawn of humanity.[7] We have a moral sense. We know that certain things are wrong. But we also have conflicting desires. We are drawn to do what we know we should not do, and often we yield to temptation. Anyone who has ever tried to lose weight knows exactly what that means. In the moral domain, it is what the Torah means when it speaks of “straying after your heart and after your eyes, following your own sinful desires.” (Numbers 15:39)

The moral sense, wrote James Q. Wilson, “is not a strong beacon light radiating outward to illuminate in sharp outline all that it touches.” It is, rather, “a small candle flame, casting vague and multiple shadows, flickering and sputtering in the strong winds of power and passion, greed and ideology.” He added: “But brought close to the heart” it “dispels the darkness and warms the soul.”[8]

Wittgenstein once said that “the work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders.”[9] In the case of Judaism the purpose of the outward signs – tzitzit, mezuzah and tefillin – is precisely that: to assemble reminders, on our clothes, our homes, our arms and head, that certain things are wrong, and that even if no other human being sees us, God sees us and will call us to account. As a result of recent research, now have the empirical evidence that reminders make a significant difference to the way we act.

“The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked; who shall know it?” said Jeremiah.

Jeremiah 17:9

One of the blessings and curses of human nature is that we use our power of reason not always and only to act rationally, but also to rationalise and make excuses for the things we do, even when we know we should not have done them. That, perhaps is one of the lessons the Torah wishes us to draw from the story of the spies. Had they recalled what God had done to Egypt, the mightiest empire of the ancient world, they would not have said: “We cannot attack those people; they are stronger than we are.” (Num. 13:31) But they were gripped by fear. Strong emotion – fear especially – distorts our perception. It activates the amygdala, the source of our most primal reactions, causing it to override the prefrontal cortex that allows us to think rationally about the consequences of our decisions.

Tzitzit, with their thread of blue, remind us of heaven, and that is what we most need if we are consistently to act in accordance with the better angels of our nature. [1] Chen-Bo Zhong, Vanessa K. Bohns, and Francesca Gino, Good Lamps Are

the Best Police: Darkness Increases Dishonesty and Self-Interested Behavior, *Psychological Science* 21 (2009), pp. 311–314. [2] This and the following paragraphs are based on Ara Norenzayan, *Big Gods: How Religion Transformed Cooperation and Conflict*, Princeton University Press, 2013, pp. 13-54. [3] *Ibid.*, p. 19. [4] Voltaire, *Political Writings*, ed. David Williams (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 190. [5] Norenzayan, *Big Gods*, p. 39. [6] He did not say these precise words, but said something similar in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880). [7] Commentary to Brachot, introduction. [8] James Q. Wilson, *The Moral Sense*, Free Press, 1993, p. 251. [9] *Philosophical Investigations*, §127.

### [Quieting our Amygdalas by Rabbi Meredith Cahn](https://truah.org/resources/parshat-shlach-lecha-meredith-cahn/)

<https://truah.org/resources/parshat-shlach-lecha-meredith-cahn/>

In June 2017, the podcast Radiolab did an episode about a man whose brain surgery for seizures led him to have voracious appetites — food, sex, and finally child pornography. He was arrested and tried in court. While awaiting trial, newly prescribed medication curtailed all those appetites. The defense argued that this proved it was a brain/physical issue. The prosecution responded that since the man controlled himself at work, it was a choice. On the podcast, Stanford evolutionary biologist Robert Sapolsky argued that this was just wrong; that the focus should not be on free will but on fear. He spoke about the role fear plays in the lives of monkeys and in our lives. Fear will stop us in our tracks. Male bonobos may want to mount any female in proximity but won't go near the alpha male's females. A person will interrupt an obsession during working hours over the risk of losing their livelihood.

As I listened to Sapolsky, I thought this concept applies to so much of our Torah: How much fear of plague or curses or just the wrath of our “slow-to-anger” God was meant to lead us on the path of righteousness?

And here in Shlach-Lecha, we find the people in a complete tizzy of fear. “Giants!” Ten of the scouts tell the people. We appeared as grasshoppers to ourselves! How can we succeed? Not even God could save us!

The mass hysteria that followed led the people to want to go back to the “safety” of Egypt, where they had so recently been enslaved to Pharaoh.

Recently, I've been thinking about all the ways people operate out of fear: for example, white fear of being “replaced” by Black people and people of color, and men's fear of women's sexuality.

The recent shootings in Buffalo, Laguna Woods, Tulsa, Uvalde (and so many more that are not reported on — 123 people die each day in the U.S. as a result of guns) and the seeming inability to do anything to stop it highlight a particular fear aroused in a segment of our population. This fear is one of people who are afraid “they are coming for your guns,” that they will lose freedom. The people — elected officials, media voices — who are misleading and inducing fear in the public might

very well descend from the scouts who were princes of their tribes. A grimmer analogy also comes to mind: They are like the biblical worshippers of Moloch, willing to sacrifice children, this time to the great god, the Second Amendment. So what do we do? What does the Torah teach us here? I think Caleb and Joshua's message (Numbers 14:9) is clear: "*Al tira!*" Have no fear; trust in God; listen to God.

Of course, we are scared when faced with giants, or when we are fed terrifying misinformation. It is what we do with our fears and anxiety that is a key to Jewish spirituality. Can we quiet our amygdalas and let our frontal lobes — our higher selves — come back online? Can we put a space between the match and the flame, as spiritual teacher Alan Morinis would tell us?

It is hard not to be afraid, as we are reminded when we sing Rebbe Nachman's *Kol HaOlam Kulo*. But this parshah might also offer us a spiritual resource for combating fear. Remember that while we might feel like grasshoppers, we are fully realized human beings. We can make choices that lead us back to the Promised Land, the place where our children are cherished, our teachers respected, and lives are sacred. We know fear is a feeling we can choose to set aside, while we work to make that Promised Land come into being.

*(Rabbi Meredith Cahn, a graduate of AJR-CA, serves as a hospital, hospice, and eldercare chaplain in Sonoma County, CA, where she lives with her husband, daughter, grandson, cat, and dog.)*

[Mapping Our Love by Rabbi Brent Chaim Spodek](https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/mapping-our-love/)

<https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/mapping-our-love/>

Moses had no idea what he was getting into.

It wasn't just when he was talking to shrubbery and confronting tyrants at the beginning of his journey that he was in the dark about what his future held. Even deep into his leadership, even after he had weathered rebellion and despair, even after he had personal encounters with the Divine, he had no idea what was coming next.

He was charged with taking these former slaves into the Land of Israel, a place about which he knew nothing. Were there a lot of people in the land, or just a few? Were they strong or weak? Were the towns open or fortified? And the soil—was it rich or poor?

Moses had no idea what he was getting into, so he sent scouts to learn more and bring back a report with useful information.

They went to see what was "out there," and when they came back, they revealed not what was out there, but what was inside of them.

Famously, they said of the people they encountered, וַנְהִי בְעֵינֵינוּ כְּחַגְבִּים וְכֵן הָיִינוּ / בְּעֵינֵיהֶם / "we looked like grasshoppers to ourselves, and so we must have looked to them" (Num. 13:33).

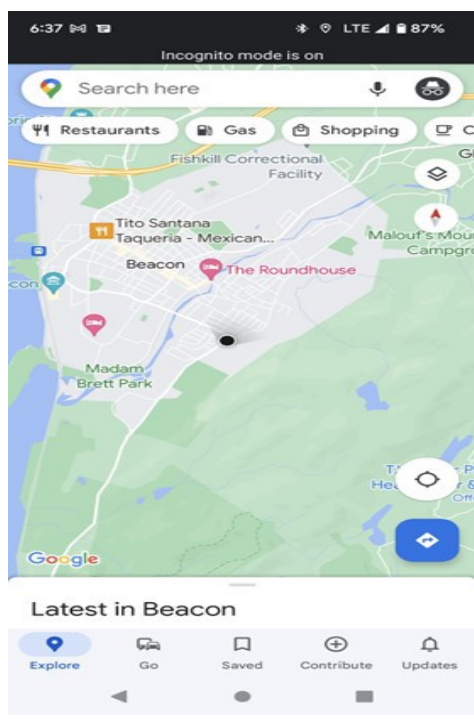
Then two of the twelve spies—Joshua and Caleb—told the people a different story. “Don’t worry,” they said. “It’s a great land, flowing with milk and honey, and the people are our prey!” They went to the same places as the other spies, saw the same things, yet told a very different story.

As the medieval commentator known as the Or Hahaim points out, the ten who said the land is unattainable and the two who said it **is** attainable both use the **exact same data** to justify their claims.

Of course, the spies are not responding to data—nobody ever does. At least in human affairs, data is literally **meaningless** until we put it in context and map it against other things we know.

Consider, for instance, 41.49413° N, 73.95983° W. These are map coordinates, meaningless until our phone plots them against some pre-existing information: a map. Indeed, Google Maps can reveal that those are the coordinates of Bob’s Corner Store, a great local deli. But Google Maps is not reality. Indeed, those exact same coordinates on a hiking map below will reveal a spot close to some excellent hiking trails.

For our purposes, we can imagine those coordinates as “experience.” Here’s that exact same experience rendered on two different maps:



Now there is obviously such a thing as an incorrect map—no reasonable rendering of 41.49413° N, 73.95983° W could locate us in the Sinai Peninsula, for instance. Both of these, however, are accurate maps, at least at the time they were created. One highlights elements of the built landscape, the other highlights trails in the

forest. Both are accurate, but they are clearly different and serve different purposes—Google Maps won't help us in the forest, and the trail map won't help us find tacos.

We don't only contextualize new experiences and unfamiliar territory. Most of us map people more than we map terrain. We contextualize the people in our lives all day every day, usually with no recognition that we are doing so.

We have experiences with our friends and loved ones and make sense of those experiences by fitting them into the maps that we carry in our brains. When we say that a person acted "out of character," what we mean is they acted in a way that didn't fit with the map, or pre-existing narrative, that we had for them.

We might lament our relative powerlessness to change the data of our lives on things that really matter: the temperament of our spouse, the behavior of our children, the legacy of our parents. We can't change the geographic coordinates in which we find ourselves. However, we **can** shape the maps we use to make sense of experience.

The noted sociologist Brene Brown said "If I could give men and women in relationships and leaders and parents one hack, I would give them, 'the story I'm telling is . . . ' Basically, you're telling the other person your reading of the situation—and simultaneously admitting that you know it can't be 100% accurate."

How might our biblical tale be different if the spies came back from their scouting, described as simply as possible what they saw, and then said, "The story I'm telling about the land is . . . ."

Unlike Moses's spies, we are both, and simultaneously, the navigator and the mapmaker. We can make choices about what we want to emphasize on the personal maps of our loved ones. Do we emphasize their strengths or their weaknesses? Do we rehearse the story of their flaws or their grandeur? Do we see them as grasshoppers or as giants?

Our biblical spies couldn't differentiate between the terrain and their map of the terrain. Most of them read their map in a negative fashion, two of them read their map in a positive fashion, and none of them had the self-awareness or modesty to recognize that their interpretation was not reality itself. In part because of their hubris, our biblical ancestors wandered in the desert for 40 years.

We don't have to do that.

We can recognize that the maps we use to make sense of our loved ones are just maps—not reality itself. Maps are absolutely vital—we would literally be lost in the woods without them. But some maps are inaccurate, and all maps go out of date eventually.

We can be smarter than the spies and stop confusing the maps inside of us with the terrain outside of us.

Knowing that different people have different maps might save us from wandering in relationships that are no more nourishing than the desert.



Perhaps the next time we find ourselves in conflict with someone we love, we can have the wisdom and courage to say, “Based on what I’m seeing, the story I’m telling is this.” Then, if we are feeling very, very brave, we can ask, “Based on what you’re seeing, what story are you telling?”

May we all be blessed with that courage, and with friends and partners who share it. (*Rabbi Brent Chaim Spodek is a Senior Rabbinic Fellow of the Shalom Hartman Institute and a Fellow of the Schusterman Foundation. Rabbi Brent is a member of the faculty at Pardes North America and has been the rabbi at Beacon Hebrew Alliance since 2010; prior to that, he served as the Rabbi in Residence at American Jewish World Service and was the Marshall T. Meyer Fellow at Congregation B’nai Jeshurun in New York.*)

### The Perils of Groupthink by Rabbi Asher Lopatin

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-perils-of-groupthink/>

*The story of the spies offers an object lesson in the importance of diversity -- and the danger of homogeneity.*

Perhaps the most nagging question in this week’s parsha is: What went wrong? Parashat Sh’lach tells the story of the spies who were dispatched by Moses to investigate the land of Israel prior to its capture by the Israelites. But the spies return with a report that frightens the people, who refuse to go forth and take the land as God had commanded.

In the version of the story related in [Deuteronomy 1:22](#), the blame for the fiasco is put on the Israelites, who pressured Moses to send a group of spies to inspect the promised land instead of simply going in and conquering it. But in the version of the story related in Parashat Sh’lach, it is Moses who chooses the spies — all leaders of the people — and sends them on their mission.

So how did this hand-picked group of leaders go so bad, give up their faith in God, and pervert the will of the people? Moreover, how did the people, just months after building the Tabernacle and experiencing God’s presence in their midst, not to mention having not long before received the Torah (and a rebuke for building the Golden Calf), succumb so easily to the negative report of the spies?

There are philosophical, psychological and political answers to these questions, but they are not even hinted at in the text, which tells us only that God concludes that the people lack the faith necessary to enter the land. But that doesn’t quite make sense either, since several verses later the people appear to change their minds and decide they do want to enter the land after all. Yet by then it’s too late, and Moses tells the people not to attempt to conquer the land or they will be defeated miserably.

In both these instances, the people were unified in failing to heed God’s word. While it’s not clear from the Torah that God appreciated this particular display of

national unity, the ancient rabbis clearly did. In the Talmud ([Megilla 23b](#)), we learn that a prayer quorum, or minyan, is constituted by ten people precisely because the ten spies in the story who gave a negative report were referred to as an “evil nation.” Just as the spies represented the entire unified Jewish nation, a minyan of ten also represents the unified Jewish nation. Though it’s a bit strange to think that the source for minyan comes from a group described as “evil,” the rabbis may have been tipping their hats to their sense of unity, even though here it resulted in tragedy.

In fact, the rabbinic admiration of unity can perhaps help us understand our original question, how this group of leaders erred so badly? Later in the parsha, after God tells the Israelites that on account of the sin of the spies they will not enter the land for 40 years, God comforts them by relating various laws pertaining to the land of Israel. In three verses in chapter 15, the Torah makes a point of equating the status of a stranger or convert with the natural born Israelite. Verse 14 makes the point most adamantly: “There shall be one law for you and for the resident stranger; it shall be a law for all time throughout the ages. You and the stranger shall be alike before the LORD.”

Why this sudden emphasis on the stranger? Perhaps the Torah is answering our nagging question – how could they? – by explaining that what we saw as the best of the Jews, their cohesion and unity, was really the very thing that got them in trouble. Until this last section of the parsha, there had been no mention of the stranger. Only representatives of the Twelve Tribes, born Israelites, were allowed to represent the people as spies. There were no strangers or converts or “others” in this group.

Yet that was precisely their downfall. God is telling the Israelites that when they get to the land they must make sure there are foreigners and converts in their midst, all abiding by the same law, a full part of society. With a diverse group residing together, the people will then be better insulated from the groupthink that gripped them in the sin of the spies. Diversity and difference is the key to the survival of our people; homogeneity is a recipe for its downfall.

In this context, it’s important to remember the last story in the Book of Leviticus, in which the son of an Israelite woman and an Egyptian man gets into a fight with a full-bred Israelite. The rabbis say that the fight arose after the half-Israelite was prevented from pitching his tent with the Tribe of Dan because his father was not a member of that tribe. Maybe had the tribe found a way to accept the stranger, it may have been the one to think differently and stand up to the spies. Instead, we get groupthink.

Parashat Sh’lach is a warning about the dangers of too much unity of thought. Let us work on bringing the stranger not only into the community, but into our thinking. Let us embrace difference in order to thrive as a people and thrive in the land.

*(Rabbi Asher Lopatin is the spiritual leader of Kehillat Etz Chaim in Detroit, Michigan. He is*

*also the founder and director of the Detroit Center for Civil Discourse, which works to nurture deep relationships between people with diverse views through dialogue. He was previously the president of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, a Modern Orthodox rabbinical school in New York City. Rabbi Lopatin received rabbinical ordination from Yeshiva University and Yeshivas Brisk in Chicago.)*

**COMING UP AT KOL RINA: Open to everyone!**

**Brunch and Learn: Prof. David Fishman on "Russia's War in Ukraine through the Lens of Jewish History," this Sunday, June 26, 10:00 am via Zoom**

On the morning of June 26 (the same day as our 10th anniversary celebration), the Susan Marx Fund for Adult Education at Kol Rina, in cooperation with Congregation B'nai Shalom of West Orange, will present Professor David Fishman, who will speak on the conflict in Ukraine from the perspective of the history of the Jews of Ukraine.

David E. Fishman is a professor of Jewish History at The Jewish Theological Seminary. Dr. Fishman also serves as director of Project Judaica, JTS's program in Ukraine, which is based at Kyiv-Mohyla Academy University in Ukraine. Dr. Fishman is the author of numerous books and articles on the history and culture of East European Jewry. His most recent book, The Book Smugglers: Partisans, Poets, and the Race to Save Jewish Treasures from the Nazis, has been hailed as "Monuments Men for book lovers" and "first rate scholarship that pulses with the beat of a most human heart."

For 15 years, Dr. Fishman was editor in chief of YIVO-Bleter, the Yiddish-language scholarly journal of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. He is a member of the Academic Committee of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Please use the following link to register on Eventbrite. Please note: To register on Eventbrite: After you click on the Tickets (or Register) button, you do not have to log into Eventbrite; just click "continue as guest."

[Eventbrite Prof. David Fisher on Ukraine](#)