

Haftarot Unrolled: Shelach

As insects in our eyes

Parshat Shelach tells the story of the delegation that Moshe sent to check out the Land of Israel just before they were supposed to begin the conquest. They returned with a dangerously mixed message: true, the land is beautiful, but there is no way that they could conquer it. This report destroyed the morale of the Jewish People, who refused to risk being killed in battle and demanded to go back to Egypt. G-d responded by decreeing that they must stay in the desert for forty years, with the hope that the next generation would have more courage and more faith.

The Haftarah takes place at the end of those forty years. The entire original generation is dead, and Yehoshua is now poised to take the Jewish People into the Land of Israel and begin the conquest. Like Moshe, Yehoshua sends spies to scout out the land. His "secret agents" are identified within hours of arriving in Jericho, and after a single conversation with one person (Rachav the prostitute), spend the rest of their time hiding out from the authorities. Nevertheless, the Haftarah relates their mission not as a failure, but as a success. By understanding what went right with Yehoshua's spies in the Haftarah, we can begin to understand what went wrong with Moshe's spies in the Parsha.

The final report of Yehoshua's spies shows us that they achieved the purpose of their mission. It states:

כִּי יִתֵּן ה' בְּיָדֵינוּ אֶת כָּל הָאֶרֶץ וְגַם כָּל יֹשְׁבֵי הָאֶרֶץ מִפְּנֵינוּ
"... that Hashem has given the entire land into our hands, and all the inhabitants
of the land are helpless before us." (Yehoshua 2:24)

Yehoshua's spies were not sent to get information about the weaknesses of the city and its army. That is not what the Jewish People needed to know in order to conquer the land. What they needed to hear was more basic:

- It is G-d who decides who wins and who loses.
- Those who currently live in the land are aware of this, and therefore do not have the courage to fight back.

Armed with this belief, they were able to take on the conquest of fortified cities defended by experienced, trained armies. Without this belief, it would have been not only impossible but pointless.

Did Moshe's generation not share this belief? Did they not know that it is G-d who runs the world? In the Haftarah, when Rachav tells Yehoshua's spies the reasons why the people of Jericho are terrified, she points to the Splitting of the Sea as the event that showed G-d's power and His intervention on behalf of the Jewish People. Moshe's spies had been there in person, they themselves crossed the Sea. Moreover, in the Song of the Sea, they sang:

אִז נִבְהָלוּ אֱלֹפֵי אֶדּוֹם אֵילֵי מוֹאָב יִחַזְמוּ רָעַד נִמְגּוּ כָּל יֹשְׁבֵי כְנָעַן
Then the chieftains of Edom are shaken, the heads of Moav are gripped by
trembling, all the inhabitants of Canaan are helpless (Shemot 15:15)

Moshe's spies knew that the Splitting of the Sea would cause the inhabitants of Canaan to feel helpless and powerless to oppose them. How, then, did they come back from their mission and say the following:

לֹא נוּכָל לָעֲלוֹת אֶל הָעָם כִּי חֹזֶק הוּא מִמֶּנּוּ
No, we cannot go up against that nation, for they are stronger than we are.
(Bamidbar 13:31)

It is as if G-d is not part of the equation at all. And when you take Him out of the equation, then in reality, the Canaanites were much stronger, physically and militarily, than the Jewish People, and Israel in fact had no chance against them. Moshe's spies continued to report from that perspective:

...הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר עָבְרָנוּ בָּהּ לְתוֹר אֶתֶּהָ אֶרֶץ אֹכֶלֶת יוֹשְׁבֶיהָ הוּא וְכָל הָעָם אֲשֶׁר רָאִינוּ בְּתוֹכָהּ
אֲנָשִׁי מִדּוֹת : וְשָׁם רָאִינוּ אֶת הַנְּפִלִים בְּנֵי עֲנָק מִן הַנְּפִלִים וְנָהִי בְּעֵינֵינוּ כַּחֲגָבִים וְכֵן הָיִינוּ
בְּעֵינֵיהֶם :
"...the land that we toured through is a land that eats its inhabitants, and all the
people that we saw there were men of measure. There we saw the Nefilim, the
sons of the giant, of the Nefilim! We were as insects in our eyes, and so we
were in their eyes. (Bamidbar 13:32-3)

It is true that Canaan is a difficult land. It is true that the people who lived there were "men of measure", and it is even true that some of the cities were inhabited by a race that could be considered "giants".

But it is their last sentence that sheds the most light on the spies' failure. "We were as insects in our eyes, and so we were in their eyes." The Midrash calls them to task for this statement:

אָמְרוּ וְנָהִי בְּעֵינֵינוּ כַּחֲגָבִים אָמַר הַקָּב"ה וַיִּתְּרֵנִי עֲלֵיהֶם אֲלָא וְכֵן הָיִינוּ בְּעֵינֵיהֶם יוֹדְעִים
הֵייתֶם מִה עָשִׂיתִי אֲתֶכֶם לְעֵינֵיהֶם מִי יֹאמֶר שְׁלֵא הֵייתֶם בְּעֵינֵיהֶם כַּמְּלָאכִים
They said, "We were like insects in our eyes". G-d said, I would have let this
pass, but "so we were in their eyes"?! How do you know how I made you look
in their eyes? Who says that you weren't like angels in their eyes?!

(Bamidbar Rabba 16:11)

It is natural and understandable that while encountering such powerful people, the spies would feel "like insects in our eyes." It does not bode well for a military campaign to have that self-image, but it might have passed. However, when they projected this image of themselves onto their opponents, they showed that they did not believe what they said at the Sea. They did not believe that G-d could cause the inhabitants of Canaan to feel powerless against them.

If you see yourself as an insect, and you don't believe that G-d has any power over how others see you, then you are an insect, and have no business fighting giants.

But if you realize that how others see you is up to Him, then the giants are helpless before you. If G-d wants the inhabitants of Canaan to see the Jewish People as His avenging angels, then that is what they will see.

And so, a few chapters after the Haftarah, when the Jewish People fulfil the promise made to Rachav by Yehoshua's spies to save her and her family, this is how they are described:

וְאֶת רַחַב הַזֹּנָה וְאֶת בֵּית אָבִיהָ וְאֶת כָּל אֲשֶׁר לָהּ הִחְיָה יְהוֹשֻׁעַ וַתָּשֶׁב בְּקֶרֶב יִשְׂרָאֵל עַד הַיּוֹם
הַזֶּה כִּי הִחְבִּיֵּאתָ אֶת הַמַּלְאָכִים אֲשֶׁר שָׁלַח יְהוֹשֻׁעַ לְרַגֵּל אֶת יְרִיחוֹ
And Rachav the prostitute and her family and all that was hers, Yehoshua protected; she lived among Israel until this day, for she hid the **angels** that Yehoshua sent to spy on Jericho (Yehoshua 6:25)

When Rachav encountered Yehoshua's spies, she did not see two men who were incompetent amateur gatherers of military intelligence. She saw angels of G-d.

Moshe's spies did not believe that they were seen as angels of G-d. They saw themselves as insects, and could not fathom that anyone might be helpless before them. They projected this self-image to the rest of the Jewish People, and made conquest impossible. Yehoshua's generation, raised under the shadow of G-d's Presence for forty years in the desert, internalized the concept that they are G-d's People, representing Him as His messengers to the world. They had the courage and faith to be angels, and so they were seen by the inhabitants of Canaan.

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In memory of my father, Peter Rozenberg, ז"ל
לעילוי נשמת אבי מורי פנחס בן נתן נטע ז"ל