



Around the Shabbat Table

**Shabbat Shelach 5763
June 2003**

*This week's writer: Rabbi Arnold D. Samlan, Director of Nassau/Queens Services
Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York*

Introduction

Shalom! This is the last issue of Around the Shabbat Table for the current school year, and all of us at the Board of Jewish Education wish you and your families an enjoyable summer.

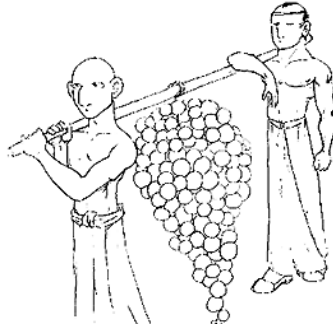
This week, the Torah portion of Shelach, from the book of Bamidbar / Numbers, is read in synagogue. The *parasha* continues the narrative of the Israelites' travels through the desert, on their way from Egypt to the Land of Israel. In the beginning of the *parasha*, God commands Moses to "send men to scout out the land of Canaan." Twelve spies are chosen, one from each tribe, to see what the land is like, and to determine its military might.

According to the Torah, the spies spent 40 days in the land. Upon their return, they issued a report that praised the land and its produce. However, the report noted that "the people who live in the land are powerful...we cannot attack the people...[the land] devours its settlers...we looked like grasshoppers to ourselves, and so we looked to them" (Numbers 13: 28, 31-33).

This report caused great upheaval among the Israelites, who had only recently left Egyptian slavery. They criticized Moses and God for leading them to a land in which they would be killed in battle. Although two spies, Joshua and Caleb, appealed to the Israelites to trust in God, and not to fear the inhabitants of Canaan, the people were not appeased. On the contrary, they were prepared to stone these two spies.

God then appeared to the people, and spoke to Moses. God threatened to destroy the nation, and to build a new nation from Moses. Moses however, appealed to God on behalf of the people. He also pointed out that, if God destroyed the Israelites, the Egyptians would believe that God's power was limited, and that He was not able to bring them victoriously into the land of Canaan / Israel.

As this part of the *parasha* concludes, God informs the people that they will wander in the wilderness for 40 years. During that time, the generation that left Egypt will die off, and a new generation will lead the people into the land. According to the text, only the two spies, Joshua (who later becomes the leader of the entire nation) and Caleb, will remain alive of that generation, and will enter the land.



Questions for Your Family's Discussion

When your family sits down together this Shabbat, here are some questions for you to wrestle with:

1. What do you think the Torah is trying to teach us when it states that "we looked like grasshoppers to ourselves, and so we looked to them"? How does the way we view ourselves affect how others perceive us?
2. In what way might the self-perception that "we looked like grasshoppers" have been shaped by the people's experience of growing up enslaved? Why would a new generation not have the same psychological obstacle?
3. According to one opinion, the idea of a *minyan*, a prayer quorum of ten, comes from this *parasha*. Shortly after the ten spies give their majority report, discouraging the Israelites, God says to Moses and Aaron "How much longer shall that wicked *community* keep muttering against me?" According to this opinion, the "community" that God is criticizing is, in particular, the ten spies. Thus, a "community" must number ten individuals. Why do you think the rabbis chose this instance of ten individuals to show what the minimum size of a community is? Why didn't they choose a more positive example of a community?

Some Texts to Wrestle With

The people's self-image as appearing like grasshoppers led to their downfall. The following is a Hasidic statement that talks about how we view ourselves:

A Jew should always carry two purses, so that he may reach into either one or the other according to his needs. One with "I am but dust and ashes." The other with "For my sake was the world created."

- Simcha Bunam

- What does the text tell us about how we should view ourselves?

In this week's *parasha*, it is *God* who initiates the process of sending out spies. However, when the story is retold in the book of Devarim / Deuteronomy, the decision to send spies is attributed to the *people*.

...all of you came to me and said, "Let us send men ahead to spy out the land for us...so I selected twelve of your men..."

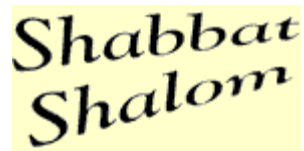
(Deuteronomy 1:22-23)

1. Why do you think the Torah includes two somewhat different accounts of the same event?
2. Why might Moses have completely placed the responsibility on the people in his retelling of the story in Deuteronomy -- as part of the review of the people's history shortly before they actually enter the land of Israel?



Towards an Action Agenda

1. Each of us probably has times in our lives in which we feel like "grasshoppers," somewhat small and insignificant. But, in fact, our tradition teaches us that each of us is "a small world" (Midrash Hagadol). Make a list with your family of the things that you do, or can do, to make a difference in the world, and that demonstrate how we can be "giants."
2. Joshua and Caleb become the true heroes of this *parasha*. What are the elements of their behavior that made them heroic? What are the things that we do, or can do, to be heroes?



**Shabbat Shalom and
Have a Great Summer!**

Please join together in learning with other families by sharing your family's discussions and ideas by posting them on our web site. Simply respond with your thoughts and ideas to RavADS@bjeny.org

If there is any way we can be of service, please contact Rabbi Arnold D. Samlan at the BJE Nassau Queens Center, 516-876-6535, or see our web site: www.bjeny.org

Around the Shabbat Table is a project of the Nassau / Queens Center of the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York. This project has been funded through a generous grant by the Long Island Program Services Committee of UJA-Federation of New York.

© Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York, 2003