

## **Sending Scouts & Unbridled Fear – Parashah Sh'lach 5782**

I remember the days when I could go play outside after school – after my homework was done, and before dinner. Sometimes we even got to play after dinner – in the summertime, when it was light well into the evening. My friends and I would play tag, kickball in the street, and hide and seek. We would even occasionally go and scout out the street another block over, and as the light began to fade, it got spooky, and we got scared and ran as fast as we could back to our street.

In Sh'lach, Moses is instructed by God to send scouts, one representative from each tribe, to scout the land of Canaan. They are instructed, go see what kind of country it is, are the people there strong or weak, few, or many? Is the country they dwell in good or bad? Are the towns they live in open or fortified? Soil rich or poor? Wooded or not? And, bring back some of the fruit of the land.

They go, scout the land, and bring back a large cluster of grapes, - so large, that it had to be carried by two people – and some pomegranates and figs. They return at the end of forty days.

They go straight to Moses and Aaron AND the whole Israelite community, show them the fruit of the land and say: “We came to the land you sent us to; it does indeed flow with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. However, the people who inhabit the country are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large...”

Caleb, one of the men among the scouts came forward and hushed the people and said, “Let us by all means go up, and we shall gain possession of it, for we shall surely overcome it.” But the other men who had gone up with him said, “We cannot attack that people, for it is stronger than we.” And so they spread fear among the Israelites, saying “All the people that we saw there are of great size... – and we looked like grasshoppers to ourselves, and so we must have looked to them.” The whole community broke into loud cries, and the people wept.

Caleb and Joshua, the two men among the twelve scouts, spoke up and said no, we can do this. If God is pleased with us, God will bring us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and give it to us, only you must not rebel against Adonai. Have no fear!

And then the whole Israelite community threatened to pelt Caleb and Joshua with stones.

God is just about to strike the people with pestilence and disown them, when Moses speaks up convincingly on their behalf. God simply decides that instead of bringing them forthwith into the Promised Land, this generation was to die off as they wandered for forty years in the wilderness, and God would then bring their children into the Promised Land.

If you're hearing a theme here, of the destructive nature of unbounded fear, you're right.

Unbounded fear rids people of common sense, reason, and can inspire group-think, with disastrous effects. I see America as a country, though having made numerous advances in the last several decades, has within it, those who have scouted out the future, and have come back afraid of the progress we have been making. Progress in equality, opportunity, civil rights, gender and sexual identity, marriage, and the care of our planet. But that progress scared them, and they have come back yelling to all, you must be afraid of this, we will lose our identity, lose our jobs, the views of those in the future are going to take away who we are and what we have. The scouts have come back in great fear, yelling this to anyone who will listen, declaring that we must undo the progress we have made. And that is just what happened this morning. A hundred years of progress has been undone.

*The JCPA wrote this morning:* Today's dismantling of nearly 50 years of Supreme Court precedent undermines reproductive freedom, endangers people's health, and will inevitably lead to the criminalization of those who get abortions and the doctors who perform them. We know that abortion bans do not stop abortions; they only stop safe abortions. This decision will disproportionately impact people of color, those who are low-income, and young people. Studies show that banning abortions leads to poor health outcomes for the pregnant person, long term poverty, and other adverse health and economic impacts. This ruling could even lead to death if a person experiences an ectopic pregnancy or other life-endangering conditions that require an abortion, as would be the case in those states that have passed "trigger" laws banning abortion without exception.

Prohibiting abortion access is contrary to Jewish law, traditions, and our principal value of saving a life; it enshrines specific religious imperatives in American law. Judaism compels us to stand for all life, and we prioritize the life and health of a pregnant person. While we treat a fetus with great significance, it does not merit the status of a

person until the moment of birth and then it has equal status with the person giving birth. If the fetus endangers a person's life physically or, according to at least some Jewish religious authorities, through mental anguish, Jewish law supports abortion of a fetus up until the moment of birth.<sup>1</sup>

We live in an America which still does not have an Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution of the United States. Authored by Alice Paul, Crystal Eastman, and others in 1923 and later revised, the proposed Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) mandates that: "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex." Early efforts to pass the ERA grew out of a recognition that the commitment to equality rooted in the U.S. Constitution could not be fully realized without an explicit, meaningful commitment to equality regardless of sex. Women and people across the gender spectrum increasingly face mounting attacks on their rights and autonomy, and we need to state clearly that women and people of any gender may not have their equality of rights denied or abridged.

I'd like to scout out the future. If I could go see the future, I would hope to see people of all genders, living life without fear of unwanted pregnancy, without concern that an ectopic pregnancy could go untreated by a fearful doctor. I would hope to see people without fear that their right to marry may be taken away. Without the fear that contraception could be taken away. I would hope to see people thriving, supporting and raising their families. I would hope to see a world that cares more about being loving and responsible than spreading fear and hate.

I feel as though we were on the verge of the holy land, and we are now about to spend the next forty years wandering in the desert. There is much work to do.

Yes, there are things we can do, and I am going to assume for this moment, that you have, are, or will be doing them. But right now, it is Shabbat. Shabbat is a sanctuary in time, as Abraham Joshua Heschel taught. This sanctuary in time, is a call to look towards a future, and imagine that future when our world will be at peace, and imagine we have that for these hours of Shabbat, until we see three stars in the sky tomorrow evening.

But how do we get there, how can we create this future? How may we generate for ourselves enough peace of mind to embrace Shabbat?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://jewishpublicaffairs.org/news/jcpa-condemns-supreme-court-decision-overturning-roe-v-wade%E2%99%BC/>

I believe that if we glance back toward the closing passages of this week's Torah portion, we get another clue. After the whole episode of the scouts, and learning that we would wander in the desert forty years, the parashah ends with the instruction to make fringes on the corners of our garments throughout the ages...thus shall you be reminded to observe all My commandments and to be holy to your God.

What do these fringes mean? These fringes represent the 613 Commandments elucidated in the Torah. I believe this instruction to attach fringes teaches us four things:

1. We are to stay out of trouble by doing the positive commandments, and refraining from doing the "you shall not" commandments. As my teacher Reb Mel Gottlieb teaches, the whole Torah was brought to us to make each of us a mensch.
2. This is a hopeful message. If we cannot change or follow rules, we wouldn't be given them.
3. We have free will. Yes, we have commandments and obligations, but without free will we cannot choose to live by them or even study them.
4. It is possible to change the world from what is to what could be.<sup>2</sup>

So if you feel like I do that we arose today into a day that is darker, blinder, and less assured, it is imperative, my dear friends, that we care of our selves, of our souls, and really take a Shabbat. Shabbat is a day of rest. Let your Shabbat nourish you, not just body, but soul too – take the hours of Shabbat to look at the sky, listen to the birds, rest, meditate, walk, talk with friends or family. Take care of your souls so that you are nourished, and your soul is revived for the week ahead and our work of changing the world from what is to a world that can be.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Lisa Bock

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<sup>2</sup> Email message from colleague Rabbi Jill Zimmerman, 6/24/2022.