

Whether Imagination is a Source of Power or Disempowerment is Up to You: Sermon on Shlach Lecha

This morning, I would like to speak to you about the power of imagination. Here, let me put great emphasis on power. It was none other than Albert Einstein who was able to imagine things happening in the universe that are only now being verified. "**Imagination** is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited, whereas **imagination** embraces the entire world, stimulating progress, giving birth to evolution." The English word "imagination" come from the Latin *imaginare*, 'form an image of, represent' and *imaginari*, 'picture to oneself'. The ability to picture ourselves in a different situation, or the world not as it but as it could be, gives us power. Or, as Mohammed Ali once said, "The man who has no imagination has no wings!" If imagination gives us the power to see what can be and inspire us to achieve it, then logic would dictate that a person without imagination can find themselves powerless. In our portion this week, we will see what happens when a people's imagination fails them, and also how imagination allows us to create new possibilities when the facts say otherwise.

In our portion, Shlach Lecha, the Children of Israel stand on the precipice of the promised land in a place on the border called Kadesh Barnea. It is time to fulfill the promise that was made to Abraham and Sarah; time to settle the land. This generation had seen the power of God as no other had before or after them:

- They had witnessed the plagues
- They had walked on dry land as the sea split
- They had stood at Sinai
- They had eaten the manna that God had provided as they marched in the *midbar*

In Shlach Lecha, the text begins:

Send out for yourself men who will scout the Land of Canaan, which I am giving to the children of Israel. You shall send one

בְּשַׁלַּח לְךָ אַנְשִׁים וַיִּתְּרוּ אֶת־אֶרֶץ
כְּנָעַן אֲשֶׁר־אֲנִי נֹתֵן לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אִישׁ
אֶחָד אִישׁ אֶחָד לְמִטֵּה אֲבֹתָיו תִּשְׁלְחוּ
כָּל נָשִׂיא בְּהֵם:

man each for his father's tribe; each one shall be a chieftain in their midst."

Send out spies to reconnoiter the land. It is a necessary and practical thing to do. But *Shlach Lecha* can also have a different meaning: Send for yourselves, allay your fears, give the people the confidence to go forward. But, of course, the report of the spies will have a very different effect. When the spies return, 2 of them, Joshua and Caleb, reassure the people that with God's help, they can go forward and enter the land:

"We can surely go up and take possession of it, for we can indeed overcome it." וַיֹּאמֶר עֲלֵה נַעֲלֵה וְיִרְשָׁנוּ אֹתָהּ
כִּי-יָכוֹל נוֹכַל לָהּ:

However, the other 10 spies have a very different understanding:

32They spread an [evil] report about the land which they had scouted, telling the children of Israel, "The land we passed through to explore is a land that consumes its inhabitants, and all the people we saw in it are men of stature. לְבוֹיָצִיאוֹ דִבַּת הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר תָּרוּ אֹתָהּ
אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר
עָבְרָנוּ בָּהּ לְתוֹר אֹתָהּ אָרֶץ אֹכֶלֶת
יוֹשְׁבֶיהָ הִוא וְכָל-הָעָם אֲשֶׁר-רָאִינוּ
בְּתוֹכָהּ אַנְשֵׁי מְדוֹת:

33There we saw the giants, the sons of Anak, descended from the giants. In our eyes, we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we were in their eyes. לְגוֹשָׁם רָאִינוּ אֶת-הַנְּפִילִים בְּנֵי עֲנָק
מִן-הַנְּפִילִים וְנָהִי בְּעֵינֵינוּ כְּחַגְבִּים וְכֵן
הָיִינוּ בְּעֵינֵיהֶם:

12 spies had gone up to the land and seen the very same things but came to radically different conclusions. The only difference between them: Imagination!

Here is a great example of the power that imagination can offer, and how a lack of imagination can render you and an entire people powerless.

Joshua and Caleb could *imaginari*, as the Latin would suggest; they could imagine themselves in the land. They could see the fulfillment of the dream first shared with Abraham.

But for the other spies, the people of the land appeared as giants, and they assumed that the Israelites would appear to them as grasshoppers.

Just how wrong the 10 spies were is revealed in our Haftarah, when a Canaanite woman will report to Joshua a generation later that the people of Canaan saw the Israelites as giants and were terrified of them!

What is the difference between the spies? Why do they see things in such radically different ways? Imagination!

Here is a story that portrays how a lack of imagination, the inability to see yourself in a different situation, can disempower a person, a nation, to go forward. Some would claim that what happened that day was a lack of faith. But imagination is at the heart of faith. In fact, faith is a form of religious imagination, which allows us to see the world in an entirely different way, and imagine the world that could be, even if all evidence is to the contrary.

That brings us to the other example of imagination in our Torah reading. It concerns the creation of *Tzitzit*, tassels, on the corners of your garments. Our portion ends with what we know as the third paragraph of the Shmah:

37The Lord spoke to Moses, saying:

לְזוֹנֵי אֱמֹר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר:

38Speak to the children of Israel and you shall say to them that they shall make for themselves fringes on the corners of their garments, throughout their generations, and they shall affix a thread of sky blue [wool] on the fringe of each corner.

לְחַדְבָּר אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם וְעָשׂוּ לָהֶם צִיצִית עַל-כַּנְּפוֹי בְּגָדֵיהֶם לְדֹרֹתָם וְנָתַנּוּ עַל-צִיצִית הַכַּנֵּף פִּתְיֵל תְּקָלֵת:

39This shall be fringes for you, and when you see it, you will remember all the commandments of the Lord to perform them, and you shall not wander after your hearts and after your eyes after which you are going astray.

לְטוֹהֵיָה לָכֶם לְצִיצִית וּרְאִיתֶם אֹתוֹ וְזָכַרְתֶּם אֶת-כָּל-מִצְוֹת יְהוָה וְעָשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם וְלֹא-תָתְרוּ אַחֲרַי לְבַבְכֶם וְאַחֲרַי עֵינֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר-אַתֶּם זֹנִים אַחֲרֵיהֶם:

40 So that you shall remember and perform all My commandments and you shall be holy to your God.

מִלְמַעַן תִּזְכְּרוּ וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֶת־כָּל־
מִצְוֹתַי וְהָיִיתֶם קְדוֹשִׁים לֵאלֹהֵיכֶם:

41 I am the Lord, your God, Who took you out of the land of Egypt to be your God; I am the Lord, your God.

מֵאֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִי
אֶתְכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לֵהֵיוֹת לָכֶם
לֵאלֹהִים אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

In the ancient world, people wore togas and it was common to decorate them with fringes or tassels. It could be a sign of rank or prestige. If you go to the Oriental Institute, there is a bust of Hummrabi, a great leader from the time of Abraham, with fringes evidently befitting his rank.

What is unique about the law given at the end of our portion is the *Petil Techaylet*, the thread of blue, which is to be a reminder of the covenant with God and our responsibility to follow the Torah. That thread of blue is one of the earliest examples of a society that saw the worth in every individual. Every Israelite from the King to the water drawer had a thread of blue which reflected God's viewpoint. We are all valued in the eyes of God. We are all worthy in the eyes of God.

But something happened along the way of Jewish history. At some point after the destruction of the Temple, the particular shellfish that was used to create the dye for the *Petil Techeylet* could no longer be found. The means to fulfill the mitzvah had disappeared.

So, what do you do in such a situation?

The obvious answer is to stop fulfilling the mitzvah. Maybe it is a sign from God. But, one can easily hear the arguments for the maintenance of tradition: *This is the way it was always done. Who are we to tamper with a way of doing something that goes back generations?* This represents another form of the failure of imagination.

But the Rabbis were, if anything, imaginative.

They replaced the tradition of the *Petil Techeylet* with an intricate pattern of knots and strands. The Rabbis employed the ancient system where, in the absence of the Arabic numbering system, they would use Hebrew letters as numbers: *aleph* being one, *beit* two, etc. From this perspective, the Hebrew word *TziTzit*, fringes, tassels, adds up to 600. 5 knots and 8 strands make 13. So, when you look at the *Tzitzit*, and if you use your imagination, you can see 613, which is the number of Mitzvot of Rabbinic Judaism.

The Rabbis, in their quest to uncover the word of God and discern the Divine will, created an approach to uncover the Mitzvot of the Torah: 248 representing the parts of the body and 365 representing the days of the year. Together they make 613, time and space. Their approach gave us a way to continue practicing Jewish life in changing circumstances. Their approach allowed us to see ourselves tied to Jewish life wherever the winds of history would take us. Their approach allowed us to continue practicing Judaism without a Temple, outside of the land of Israel.

All we had to do was use our imagination.

In short, the *Tzitzit* that replaced the *Petil Techelet* represent the power of imagination. Which, unlike the 10 spies, allowed us to go forward as Jews during the years of exile. One could argue that *Tzitzit* are a great symbol of the reason that Jews were able to survive when no other people has done so, for so long outside of their own land. Such is the power of imagination. Moreover, during that long night of exile, we never stopped imagining our return to the Land of Israel. And when the opportunity arose to return to *Eretz Yisrael*, the Jewish people began to return. It took the genius of Theodore Herzl, a secular Jew writing in Vienna, to write the *Juden Stadt*, where he imagines the Jewish people in the land of Israel building a remarkable country after nearly 2000 years outside of it. *Im Tirzu, ain zo agada*: If you will it, it is no dream. But first you must have the ability to imagine it!

The Rabbinic approach to Halacha has also allowed us to imagine a Judaism in a rapidly changing world. Our Conservative Movement has been on the vanguard of these changes by challenging Halacha to be more inclusive, to women and to Jews who have different sexual orientations. In so doing, we

are using our religious imagination to continue to retie the knots of the *Tzitziyot*, and in this manner empower the Jewish community in remarkable ways.

Our portion of Shelach Lecha offers us a powerful lesson on the powerlessness that comes from a lack of imagination and the power that comes with the ability to see oneself and the world through a different lens. The Rabbis understood the power of imagination and seized upon it. The Zionists understood the possibilities of imagination when they built the Jewish State. In the upheaval that the Coronavirus has brought to our world on every level, the question is how well we will be able to imagine a different future. It will either empower us to come together to build something even better in its wake, or disempower us to go down a very different path. The power is in our hands, or should I say, our imagination.