

Shabbat Shlach ShaLom



by Phyllis Chesler

Really, how much can happen in one parsha? Can it encompass a multitude of past and future themes and also present a non-stop series of the most agonizing dramas? Rebellious and self-destructive mobs; Moshe and Aharon falling on their faces yet again; Yehoshua and Calev ripping their garments, God threatening to destroy us all—and about what it means to “see” with eyes of faith as opposed to “scouting” and scanning the world without such vision.

Here we are reminded that Moshe had to flee Egypt because of “kotzer ruach,” the shortness of spirit that slavery and oppression cause. However, Moshe is no longer alone. Aharon,

Yehoshua ben Nun, (Yehuda) and Calev ben Yefunah (Ephraim) both emanations of Yitzhak, Leah, and Rahel, stand with him as God always does. Only a very small minority—Moshe, Aharon, and the two noble spies—see clearly. The majority, even after having experienced being freed by God from Egypt—a far mightier power than the descendants of giants; after Sinai; after being heaven-fed and heaven-led through the wilderness; the majority, (that's us), are still incredibly fearful, susceptible to gossip, quick to rage, heretical. Our ancestors actually want to return to Egypt! They mistrust, even scorn God, prefer slavery and an easier idol-worshipping culture, at least one that is free of such burdensome commandments.

I used to joke that had the miraglim been miraglot we might have been able to enter the land much sooner, they would have seen through eyes of faith. But now I think that's a cheap shot. The issue I see, only one among many, has to do with how set apart leaders are from non-leaders, like the Mitzva Trumat Challah (15:21), which we are given in this very parsha, and how dangerous herd judgement can be.

Oh, our poor maddened, blinded people! Perhaps the people who were so easily led by spying slander may also have known, even before God did, that they were not ready to enter the Promised Land, knew that they could not or would not obey the commandments and thus, they sabotaged their long promised birthright. This may be why God, pacified by Moshe, immediately discusses both the future sacrifices as well as the mitzva of t'fllin so that they will remind us of the commandments and we will not be led astray.

Whenever I read about these 10 faithless spies I always think that ten men in a minyan are forever atoning for their failures—but I also think of Rahab, that most honorable of converts, that precursor of Ruth, who later hid and saved Yehoshua and about whom we read in this week's haftorah.

Have a great Shabbos people!

The painting above is by a nineteenth century French artist, James Tissot, and it is titled: "The Twelve Spies."