

PARSHAT SHELACH
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“Perception is reality – or so they say. Who we are is often, in our eyes, not a matter of what we do but how we think about ourselves, usually refracting our self-image through what we think others think about us,” so writes Dr. Erica Brown in commenting on our Torah portion of this week. She then gives two examples of this type of thinking: “A fifteen-year-old boy buys a pair of jeans and he thinks he looks great in them, until one popular girl says she hates them. He goes home, puts them in the closet, and never wears them again.” She continues: “A beautiful thirteen-year –old girl looks in the mirror. When her friends look at her, they see a thin, attractive, special person. All she can see is every imperfection. ‘I’m fat,’ she says – even when the scale says otherwise. For her, it is fact, not fiction.” Whether we like it or not, people act based on their perceptions of themselves. Sometimes, they even fail to act because of them.

In our Torah reading of this morning G-d orders Moses to recruit one man from each of the 12 tribes to scout the land of Canaan. Moses explains the mission to them by informing them that they are to report back on the region’s topography, military strength, resources, and fortifications. The mission lasts 40 days. When it is over the scouts return with a report concerning the beauty of the land and the magnificence of its fruits. They say the soil is extraordinary and it is a land flowing with milk and honey. However, the report does not end there. Ten of the spies state that the cities are fortified and daunting and it will be impossible to conquer the native people. In describing the military might of the people of Canaan they state: “We saw the Nephilim there - the Anakites are part of the Nephilim – and we looked like grasshoppers to ourselves, and so we must have looked to them.”

The scouts perceived themselves as grasshoppers, as insects compared to the giants now inhabiting the land of Canaan. There was no way they could be successful. The people hear the report and weep. Joshua and Caleb, the only two leaders to go into the land and return with a positive spin, tell the people they should go up to the land and conquer it. It is Caleb who states: “Let us by all means go up and we shall gain possession of it, for we shall surely overcome it.”

Which one is the true report? Which one adequately forecasts the future? Both saw exactly the same land and witnessed the great challenges. Ten of the spies thought of themselves as weaker than they might have been. Two of them had the courage to say: “Let us go forward and we will be successful.” Sometimes we need to understand that though the challenges are great, we are stronger than we seem to be, and we can overcome them. If we don’t believe in ourselves, we will never be successful.

J.M. Barrie, the Scottish author and dramatist and inventor of *Peter Pan*, wrote: “The moment you doubt whether you can fly, you cease forever to be able to do it.” We must have faith in ourselves that we can overcome our challenges. Otherwise, we will never be successful. Many times it’s our self-perception which gets in the way of our success and does not allow us to move forward.

Mention the word “Starbucks” in the United States and everyone knows what you’re referring to. Mention the word “Second Cup” in Canada and you know that you are referring to Canada’s Starbucks. The co-founder of the Second Cup chain of coffee stores is Francis, Frank, O’Dea. His story is truly an inspirational one.

Born in 1945 in Montreal, he was sexually abused as a young boy and in his teens became dependent upon alcohol. His father took a “tough love” stance with him, ordering his son to leave home with no family contact until he straightened himself out. For a number of years he was a self-described panhandler, trying to find a place to sleep on a park bench or in a Salvation Army refuge. He found a helping hand, a Toronto paint store retailer who gave him a job for \$5.00 a day stocking shelves and cleaning up, if he showed up. One of the days that he did show up for work, the store radio played an announcement for an alcohol treatment program. It was the beginning of the rest of his life.

O’Dea has stated: “Without hope you perish.” Looking at the world differently after getting sober in the 1970’s he started a coffee shop in Toronto, which became a Canada-wide operation. The sale of Second Cup to an international food service company allowed O’Dea to become a philanthropist and an example of what can be achieved when there is hope of a tomorrow, a vision of a better life, and resources to take action. He has reconciled with his family and credits his father for having saved his life. He turned his life around, and is now making a difference in the lives of others as a speaker and philanthropist in the areas of AIDS, child literacy and landmine removal. How one sees oneself makes a great deal of difference in what is deemed possible to achieve.

The ten spies couldn’t look beyond the moment and see themselves accomplishing their mission. They could only see a difficult present and sense defeat. Joshua and Caleb, on the other hand, knew that difficulties would remain for them in the future, but they could accomplish almost anything with faith in themselves, in their people, and in their G-d.

In a few week’s time, we will read of another episode in the Israelite’s desert sojourn. Balaam is recruited by Balak, the King of Moab, to curse the Israelites as they near his territory. At first Balaam is reticent to do so, however, he finally takes upon himself the task. Three times he attempts to curse the Israelites, but instead blesses them.

There is one verse in his first oration to the children of Israel which can be interpreted either in a negative or a positive fashion. Balaam states: “As I see them from the mountain tops, gaze on them from the heights, there is a people that dwells apart, not reckoned among the nations.” It is very easy to see this verse as a portrayal of the difficulties of the Jewish people throughout history. We have been persecuted, exiled, slaughtered, and defamed by others. Our people have had a difficult history. There are those who have felt that we do not belong among the nations, that our demise is best for the world, for we are different and should be singled out for enmity and hatred.

We recall Haman’s statement to Ahasuerus, in trying to convince the king to give him permission to slaughter the Jews of his kingdom: “There is a certain people, scattered and dispersed among the other peoples in all the provinces of your realm, whose laws are different

from those of any other people and who do not obey the king's laws; and it is not in Your Majesty's interest to tolerate them." We are different, we should not be treated like others, according to Haman and other anti-Semites, and, therefore, do not deserve to exist.

Haman's tirade against the Jewish people has reverberated in various periods of history and even today. We watch today as the State of Israel is singled out for enmity and hatred by terrorist nations and by those who wish to destroy the Jewish state. Over and over again, Israel has been differentiated from the other nation states of the world. In the 2014-2015 United Nations' General Assembly session 20 resolutions were adopted against Israel, three on the rest of the world. Israel has been singled out from all the other nations of the world more than Syria, Iran, North Korea, Sudan, Yemen, and other perpetrators of human rights violations.

The BDS Movement, the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Movement, has singled out Israel to be punished. The Movement today is present on college campuses and in academia. We have seen it in Europe as recently as the Orange Phone Company executive expressing his interest in pulling the company out of Israel. BDS attacks Israel's legitimacy and its very right to exist as a Jewish state. It seeks to isolate Israel as a pariah nation and to use college campuses, churches, labor unions, and human rights organizations to further its cause. Unfortunately, its popularity is growing and it spells very difficult times for Israel in the near future. Though we have attempted to counter it in many different fashions, we are far from conquering its tentacles.

Balaam's concept of the Jewish people being a nation that it is not reckoned among others can clearly be seen at times in Jewish history, even our own. Yet, his words were to be taken as a blessing and not as a curse. If we see ourselves as a defeated nation, as a people separated, not recognized among the others, then we will be so. Self-perception will become reality. As Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks stated this week: "Jews have for far, far too long defined themselves as a people that dwells alone. If believed for long enough, it becomes a self-justifying prediction." If Balaam's message is to be taken as a blessing we must re-formulate our thinking so that we can overcome the obstacles and challenges before us.

In truth, Balaam reminded the people of their potential. When the Israelites learned of Balaam's praises, after a steady stream of rebellions and rebukes, they must have felt energized with new positive thinking. If that is the case, how should we take this phrase? "At its best," writes Rabbi Gunther Plaut, "it has signified the attempt to render an entire people holy, its voluntary submission to G-d and Torah, the development of hundreds of thousands of students and scholars, the pursuit of knowledge as a sacred discipline, and the unabashed proclamation of an apparently impossible goal – to hasten the kingdom of G-d through human effort."

We should not shy away from this mission, instead we should take it upon ourselves as a cloak of privilege. We have a task and a role in this world. It is to be a "Kingdom of Priests and a holy nation." But, we can only do so if we see ourselves in that role. If we see the world through the lens of the "lachrymose theory" of Jewish history, as stated by the great Jewish historian Salo Wittmayer Baron in 1928, then it will be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Our self-perceptions will lead us to defeat, to failure, to relinquishing hope in the future. However, if we can follow the message of Joshua and Caleb that we can be successful against all obstacles, then we will possess hope and faith in ourselves and in our mission.

Who would have thought that three years after the destruction of European Jewry that there would be a State of Israel? Who would have prophesized that American Jewry would be as educated, powerful, and politically involved as it currently is when our ancestors came to these shores as immigrants and saw a desert of Jewish knowledge and involvement? Who would have envisioned the day schools, the Jewish summer camps, the extent of Jewish philanthropy, the military might of the State of Israel, the Jewish scholarship present today? We must see the challenges of today through the perspective of history. I am not naive enough to suggest that we do not have many challenges and difficulties both in the Diaspora and in the State of Israel, however, we are a people of hope. We are a people of faith. Looking back at the episode of the spies we can learn that we can either perceive ourselves as weak, tiny, and susceptible to defeat, or we can assume the challenges of the present moment, personally and collectively, and move forward with strength and conviction.

I am convinced that Joshua and Caleb's message is the one that we must embrace today. Let us assume the responsibility of surmounting the challenges before us overcoming the obstacles and strengthening ourselves as individuals and as a collective to create a bright future for this generation and the generations to come.