

Parshat Shelach: Grasshoppers and Giants: Healing the Inner Rift of Shelach

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Parshat Shelach opens with stunning possibilities. The people of Israel stand at the edge of fulfillment, poised to enter the land they have been promised since the days of Avraham. “Send for yourself men,” God tells Moshe, “and let them scout the Land of Canaan, which I am giving to the children of Israel” (Bamidbar 13:2).

The mission is sacred. Twelve tribal leaders are chosen—not soldiers, but spiritual representatives. Rashi teaches that they were upright and worthy at the time they were sent. Their task is not just to assess terrain; it is to gather faith. The land is already given. The journey is about learning to receive it.

What returns, however, is not the affirmation of promise—it is a rupture. “We came to the land...it is indeed flowing with milk and honey, and this is its fruit” (13:27), they begin. The tone quickly shifts: “The people who dwell in the land are powerful, the cities fortified and very large...we saw giants there” (13:28). The facts remain the same, though the story changes.

The turning point arrives in a single line: “We were like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and so we must have been in theirs” (13:33). This is not simply fear—it is a collapse of self.

Their words crack something open, not only for their generation but for every one that follows. The people who had witnessed miracles, who had stood at Sinai, now stand paralyzed—not by what lies ahead, but by how small they feel within.

What they see is shaped by how they see themselves.

This moment—when internal fear overwhelms inherited promise—sits at the heart of Shelach. The parsha is not about military failure. It is about emotional unraveling. A crisis of belonging. The people are not afraid of entering the land; they are afraid they do not deserve to live inside the story they’ve been given.

This is a fear we know well.

We’ve each stood at the edge of something that asked us to grow—a relationship, a calling, a dream—and felt the pull to retreat. Often, it’s not the size of the task ahead that stops us. It’s the quiet belief that we are too small for it. That our voice doesn’t matter. That our presence isn’t enough.

Caleb tries to interrupt the spiral: “We can surely go up and take possession of it, for we can indeed overcome it” (13:30). Later, he and Joshua plead with the people: “The land is very, very good.... If God

desires us, He will bring us into it.... Only do not fear” (14:7-9). Their words do not dismiss the fear. They offer a different orientation—a return to trust and memory.

Their clarity, however, is met with resistance. The people cry out: “Why is the Lord bringing us to this land to fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken captive! Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt” (14:3-4). Egypt—the place of bondage—suddenly feels safer than the risk of becoming something new.

Here, the Torah becomes more than text. It becomes a mirror.

We see the patterns: how fear reshapes memory, how longing for safety can silence longing for growth. We rehearse our smallness so often that it begins to sound like the truth.

The midrash teaches that the night the people wept was the ninth of Av (Ta’anit 29a)—a night destined to carry grief across generations. A night of tears born not from tragedy, but from the belief that the good is too far away, and we are too small to receive it.

Even in this unraveling, the Torah does not end the story in despair.

God’s response is not destruction. It is time. “As you wept that night, so shall you weep for generations,” the midrash says. The people are not cast out; they are given forty years to wander. A generation is given space to loosen fear from its grip and raise children who see with different eyes.

Those children grow up with clouds and fire, with manna and presence. Their lives are shaped by continuity, not conquest. When their moment arrives, they do not hesitate. They move forward.

This, too, is Torah. Not only the laws and stories we inherit, but the pauses that allow us to grow into them.

Each of us carries a version of that grasshopper moment. A belief that we are too small to matter. That our voice won’t change anything. That the good is not for us.

That is not the only story.

The Torah gives us the voice of Caleb: *We can do this*. The voice of Joshua: *The land is very, very good*. The voice of Moshe, who intercedes not with denial, but with mercy: “God, slow to anger and abundant in kindness...forgive, please, the iniquity of these people according to the greatness of Your kindness” (14:18-19).

There is always another way to see. There is always a path back to promise.



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This week, we slow down and listen. Not to the voice of panic. To the quieter voice of presence. The one that says: You are not a grasshopper. You are not too small for your life. You were made to stand here.

Let us meet fear with curiosity. Let us meet smallness with compassion. Let us raise our eyes—even if they are still wet with doubt—and begin to walk.

There is still a land. There is still a future. There is still a promise that includes you.

Rabbi Yali Szulanski's journey to Maharat was shaped by her commitment to emotional wellness, spiritual growth, and community resilience. She founded The "I Am" Project/The Neshima Initiative, bringing trauma-informed wellness practices to classrooms and Jewish spaces. R' Yali is the Youth and Family Engagement Rabbi at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale and continues her work educating and tending to emotional wellness at SAR Academy and beyond.