

Seeing the Good with the Bad  
Parashat Shelach L'cha  
PSC D'var Torah

Last Tuesday, as we boarded the bus to travel to the airport heading from Budapest to Paris, our guide told us that from the moment we enter the airport until we leave France, we are not to wear anything that might visibly define us as Jewish. No kippot, no Star of David, no tzizit flailing. And from the moment we arrived in Paris, unlike in Budapest or in London, we had our own private security detail. Even before leaving for Europe to learn about the status of Jewish life on the ground, I had my suspicions: were things really as bad as they made them out to be? Is the anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist rhetoric really as bad as they say it is? Is there a legitimate need for people to flee the country because they can't live freely and peacefully in their homeland?

For a little over a week, Jenny and I traveled with more than 40 people to experience Jewish communal life in Budapest, Paris and London, sponsored by the Gladstein fellowship in entrepreneurial rabbinics, a group that I have been a part of since I started rabbinical school. There were two primary goals of the trip: to experience firsthand what it was like to live as a Jew more broadly with a specific emphasis on Masorti/Conservative Movement Jewry that exists outside of the United States, and to better understand the state of European Jewry post Holocaust. And while I definitely went in with my own preconceived notions, some of which turned out to be true, I quickly learned that things are not always as they appear. Life in general, and more directly as a Jew, is never black and white.

And perhaps it's that outlook that gets our ancestors into trouble in this morning's Torah reading. In an effort to appease the Israelites as they wander through the Wilderness, having only recently left Egypt in route to Israel, God instructs Moses to send 12 men to scout out the land. It seems like a reasonable request. You stay here and I'll go make sure the coast is clear before we move forward. Yet, the Torah speaks of a real-life problem that we have all faced. It's

the either/or culture. It's black and white, one extreme or the other. These polarities, these dichotomies are perhaps what sets the journey up to be a failure before it even starts. Moses tells the scouts, "Go up there into the Negeb...and see what kind of country it is. Are the people who dwell in it strong or weak, few or many? Is the country in which they dwell good or bad? Are the towns they live in open or fortified? Is the soil rich or poor? Is it wooded or not?"<sup>1</sup> Well, when you set it up like that, unless things are 100% perfect, you can be sure that the report will be the furthest thing from stellar. And what makes it worse is that we Jews love to complain. It's not necessarily a bad thing, but when someone asks us about an experience, we usually start with the criticisms before highlighting the blessings. And to some degree, this was not only my own expectation before going to Europe, it was one that many of the leaders on our trip painted for us before we even began our travels. And this is exactly where we enter dangerous territory.

Rabbi Mitchell Wohlberg, the spiritual leader at Baltimore's Orthodox community Beth Tfiloh, wrote an insightful piece about reimagining the questions posed to the 12 spies. What's striking about his interpretation is that a simple change in the question, both how it's asked and how it's understood, could have radically changed the negative report offered by 10 of the 12 scouts. Rabbi Wohlberg writes, "The fact of the matter is, [all 12 spies] were telling the truth. But only [Joshua and Caleb were] responding to the question that Moshe had asked them to answer. Moshe's mandate to them was to go to the land of Israel and see "*hatovah hi im raah*" – which we usually translate – "Is it good or is it bad?" But with the change of one letter – a silent letter – the *alef* of "*im*" to an *ayin* – it can be read, "Is there some good with the bad?" I know we are going to be confronting a difficult and dangerous enemy, says Moshe. I know all that! But is there good – is

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<sup>1</sup> B'midbar 13:17-20.

there something positive that can be found amidst all this that will give us hope that we can endure? “Is there some good with the bad?” is a question the spies should have given some thought to. It is a question all of us as Jews should give some thought to.”

When I started looking at my trip to Europe through this lens, הטובה היא עם רעה, is there some good with the bad, my eyes opened to a thriving Jewish life that is often lost to the rest of the world. For starters, there is an unwavering sense of pride for the Jews that remain. We met with Rabbi Tamas Vero at the Frankel Leo Synagogue and Budapest who talked about how his shul is bursting at the seams, as one of the most vibrant Jewish communities in the country, filled with people on Shabbat, overrun with children and families. Do they have their challenges in a post-Communist era? Of course, yet there is much good even with the difficult. We spent the evening in Budapest with millennial Jews who are a part of Marom, the post college Masorty young adult group, who gather at a bar and club that they built, where they sing in Hebrew, pray on Shabbat as a part of an egalitarian community, and engage in social justice to bring civil rights to other minorities in Budapest. As one Maromnick named Adam said, “If you want to breathe free air, you have to fight for it, for human rights, for gypies (Roma), for the homeless, for the Gay and lesbian community.” And even when we were in Paris, a place where we were told to hide our Jewish identities, we stood together as Jews in front of the Hyper Kacher grocery store reciting a memorial blessing, in Hebrew no less, in memory of our Jewish brothers and sisters who lost their lives along with those who died in the Charlie Hebdo tragedy, followed by a proud rendition of Hatikvah. הטובה היא עם רעה, there is good even where this bad.

Look, let’s be fair. Are these hard times for Jews in Europe? Absolutely. Is there an increase of anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism? Of course. I’m not naïve to think that things are difficult and even at times quite scary, especially when things

escalate in the Middle East. But what I experienced in Europe is that the negative sentiment is the voice of the loud minority, much the same way it is here. It would be easy to come home and share with you a similar report as the scouts. Is it good or bad? It would be easy to say it's terrible. Yet, that was not at all my impression. For me, I saw a Europe, especially in London but to my surprise also to a large extent in Paris and Budapest, that is vital and growing, not the "vast Jewish graveyard" that you might expect based on media reports. To come to that conclusion, however, required that I rethink the question, not as an either/or, but rather הטובה היא עם רעה, there is good, a tremendous amount of good, even amidst the challenging and complicated.

Shana, I think you have already begun to appreciate that life is rarely black or white. We as human beings are complex and diverse. You are a person who displays a great deal of concern and sensitivity toward people and animals and at the same time, you have a goofiness and happiness that is very much at your core. You are serious, sweet, and affectionate all wrapped in one. You are also determined and dedicated to everything you set your mind to, even when things don't come easy. Yes, it's true that you do enjoy procrastination from time to time, I mean who doesn't, yet you are someone who always pulls through in the end. Shana, as you become a Bat Mitzvah and grow throughout your life, I hope that you'll aspire to see things not as one or the other, not as opposites, but instead as finding הטובה עם הרעה, goodness even when things are tough. It is, perhaps, when we are able to do that, that we are able to, as you so thoughtfully talked about, maintain our faith in others and in our own existence, seeing possibility in all that's before us, just as Joshua and Caleb did for our ancestors.

During our final hours in Hungary, we visited with Rabbi Zoltan Radnolti to hear about the "lost generation" of Jews who were never able to practice or receive a Jewish education as a result of the Holocaust and communism. Rabbi Radnolti

showed us a painting of a flower that he bought at a flea market that looked suspicious. When he pried the seemingly ordinary, and if you ask me quite ugly flower, from its frame, he discovered the letters of the Torah written on parchment in traditional calligraphy that the Nazis had attempted to cover up with paint. Rabbi Radnolti attached the back of the painting to a few poles and a mirror so that people who looked could first see the flower, but from a slightly different angle, they could see the Torah once again revealed from the darkness. The good from within the bad. European Jewry is complicated much the same way that it is in Israel or America. We will always face obstacles and hurdles in life, especially as Jews. Yet if there is one thing I learn from our Torah reading this morning and from my time abroad it's that we have a choice about how we look at the world and how we respond in the face of adversity. We can hear the question literally, or we can be like Joshua and Caleb and reinterpret them through what's possible. The Torah behind the flower is that dim light that is still illuminated even in the darkest aspects of life, it's that good with the bad. And when we come together as a Jewish community, in Israel, in the States, in Europe and beyond, we can make sure that הטובה תהיה יותר מן הרעה, that the good will not only be there with the bad, but will one day, God willing, all we'll know is that blessing of goodness.