

# V'Zeh Piryah: And this is its fruit...

## Reading *Parashat Shelach Lecha* alongside Dr. Atul Gawande's *Being Mortal*

When I was teaching at my synagogue a few years back, Mrs. Goldberg told me, “here I am 95 years old and all of this is new for me. I didn’t know anyone in their nineties when I was growing up. And to be fair – whoever imagines they’re going to be 90 anyway?”

Like Alice Hobson, whom Dr. Gawande features in the early chapters of his book that we are all here today to discuss, Dr. Gawande shares that, “it must have felt as if [Alice] had crossed into an alien land.... The border guards were friendly and cheerful enough. They promised her a nice place to live. But she didn’t really want anyone to take care of her; she just wanted to live a life of her own.” (Gawande, 68)

As Dr. Gawande imagines how Alice feels, Mrs. Goldberg summarized for us the experience of aging as venturing into a new land, an uncharted territory.

In a few weeks, we’ll be reading from Parashat Shelach Lecha – with the entire people of Israel on the eastern bank of the Jordan River and poised to enter the land promised to them. The parashah begins with The Eternal commanding Moses: “send for yourselves men who will scout the land of Canaan.” Heeding The Eternal’s command, Moses says to these shlichim: “Go up there into the Negeb and on into the hill country, and see what kind of country it is.” Are the people there strong or weak, few or many? Is the country good or bad? Are their towns exposed or fortified? Is the soil rich or poor? Is it wooded or not? His directive concludes, “And take pains to bring back some of the fruit of the land.” (Num. 13:17-20)

The shlichim go out on behalf of the people. These emissaries are responsible to the entire community who seek the information necessary for them to end their harried journey through the wilderness and reach the Promised Land.

We are eternally hopeful to enter the Promised Land of aging with fruit in hand – beautiful simplicity, enjoying our aging process with grace and living and sharing life informed by our values. In Moses asking the shlichim to “bring back some fruit of the land” he seems to beg for a positive report – “tell us this land is verdant and life-sustaining”. He gives the shlichim the opportunity to inspire us – to tell a tale of hope and promise, to emphasize the fruits of this land.

But their fear of the unknown and of the challenges ahead cloud their judgement: “the people who inhabit the country are powerful, and the cities are walled and very large...” Naming each of the enemy tribes within the land – Anakites, Amalekites in the Negev, Amorites in the hill country, Canaanites at the Sea and along the Jordan, they cannot foresee a place in the land without trial or tribulation. (Num. 13:28-29) “The country that we scouted is one that devours its settlers. All the people that we saw in it are giants.... We looked like grasshoppers to ourselves, and all the more so we must have looked that way to them.” (Num. 13:32-33)

On hearing the report, the cry of our ancestors rises before Moses: “If only we had died in the land of Egypt.” “Or if only we might die in this wilderness! Why is The Eternal taking us to that land to fall by the sword?” (Num. 14:1-4)

Like the Nation venturing through the wilderness, in our own lives and aging we are looking for signposts not only to guide us on our journey, but to give us some sense of what lies ahead. Like Moses sending shlichim out to scout the land for us – our clients, patients, residents, friends and family ask these questions of us. Will the terrain be smooth or rough? Will we be strong or weak? Will those who we have cared for our whole lives be good to us as we age? Will the soil – our sources of financial stability – be rich to sustain us in the condition we are accustomed? Will we remain in our homes? Will we have our loved ones beside us? And will you return to me with fruit in hand?

For many, we go into this new land – this land given to us by The Eternal, promised to us for the fulfillment of our people’s destiny – and focus only on the barriers, downside, negative, the ways in which defeat is almost certainly assured. How can we possibly hope to compete against the giant that is aging, illness, and our own mortality?

I imagine you have shared a similar experience with me – with one of your clients, patients, congregants, family members... perhaps even with yourself. He begins to tell that age-old story – I don’t know what is coming up next, but all signs indicate it is going to be really difficult, really frightening, really painful... Perhaps this age will offer some fruits, but are they worth the potential for suffering, devastation, defeat?

And then he says – “what is the point of my suffering? I should just die now.”

When our lives don’t look like our own, when we are confronted with uncertainty and almost assured pain and difficulty – many ask, what is the point of this suffering? I should just die now or go back to Egypt!

Dr. Gawande shares that at least two kinds of courage are required in aging and sickness. The first is the courage to confront the reality of mortality – the courage to seek out the truth of what is to be feared and what is to be hoped. The second kind of courage Dr. Gawande outlines is the courage to act on the truth we find. (Gawande, 231)

These two kinds of courage are echoed in the tradition. Yes there are giants we will be forced to face. Yes the land is already occupied. And yes there is a promise – this is the land given to us by The Eternal.

Moses and Aaron fell on their faces; Joshua and Caleb tore their clothes. They were pleading and exhorting the people: The land is exceedingly good, it does flow with milk and honey, have no fear, don't rebel against The Eternal, we will be protected from those people... Have no fear!! (Num. 14:5-9)

Most of the shlichim, and the People Israel hearing their message, seem unable to move beyond their fears and find the promise of the future – But the wise ones tell them “the land does flow with milk and honey.” They show us the land does produce beautiful fruits. This is as true as is the presence of the giants, the enemy tribes, the almost certain conflict, pain and suffering. But in the same way they can only focus on the defeat, the surety of the end point.

Perhaps we all have this kind of impulse toward resignation in the face of adversity. The response “it would be better to die” is a reflection of hearing the honest portrayal of what is going on, but also reflects the inability to hear the hope therein.

Erica Brown, in her work *Happier Endings*, shares with us a simple truth of the work we all engage in: "Life will be meaningful only if death stands before us as a stop sign, forcing us to confront life's most difficult conversations, enabling us to dig deeper into the well of wisdom and empowering us to search for transcendence in the everyday business of living." (Brown, 121)

The everyday business of living is in courage to confront tribulations we face. And in the courage to hope – to see the joys, miracles and promise therein. For our ancestors: the miracle of having our food and water provided by God throughout our decades-long journey, being guided safely by the pillars of cloud and fire in day and night. The beauty of Revelation in receiving Torah at Sinai and at long last truly becoming the Nation of Israel. The fulfillment of our destiny of arriving at and entering into the Promised Land. And with each step, our children were born into freedom.

MJHS – in our mission of “Caring every minute, every day” – we meet people where they are to honor the values and give tribute to their legacy. We offer care along the continuum of aging – from managed long term care plans to skilled nursing, home care and adult day health centers. We manage a home health agency. We look upon those who have life-limiting and advanced illness and provide them with palliative care and, when appropriate, hospice services. We help our patients, clients, residents and members live their lives, their way, for as long as possible.

We believe in providing care with courage - preparing to confront the reality of mortality – the courage to seek out the truth of what is to be feared and what is to be hoped. We also believe in acting with compassion and passion to deliver care when and where it is needed.

We all need our shlichim to guide us – to tell us what to expect even if it arouses our fears. AND we also need Caleb and Joshua to give us hope to face the often difficult reality.

The tradition tells us: Don’t rebel. Don’t fear. Take courage to face the challenge and embrace the gifts given to us. And maybe that is a tall order for us – but let us open our ears to hear the words of our own Calebs and Joshuas. And in the work we all do I believe that we here are all called to function as Caleb and Joshua did for our communities of Israelites in the desert.

“We came to the land you sent us to; it does indeed flow with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. “

*Teaching offered by Amy E. Goodman*

Brown, Erica. *Happier Endings: A Meditation on Life and Death*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013.

Gawande, Dr. Atul. *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End*. New York: Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 2014.