

Parshat Shelach Lecha
June 5, 2010
Rabbi Alan B. Lucas
“WE HAVE NOT YET LOST OUR HOPE!”

Wow! *Shver tziz ein a yid* – this was a tough week to be a Jew! When the whole world seems to be condemning you, when the Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary – Arnie Eisen who spoke here at Beth Sholom to our JTS class on Thursday evening – says this might well be the scariest time to be a Jew – certainly since 1973 – maybe since the holocaust – referring not only to the botched Israeli attempt to interdict those ships off their coast but the successful maneuvering of Iran into a position where it might soon become a nuclear power and the threat that represents to the Jewish state – it was indeed a tough week for the Jews.

I felt a lot like Jim Joyce – he was that umpire who botched the call in Detroit that robbed Armando Galarraga of a perfect game. He made a mistake, he knew it and he knew there was no way to fix it, and his mistake cost a young pitcher his chance at something that had only occurred 20 other times in the history of baseball – and yet he had to show up to work the next day – and that picture of him – taking the lineup card from Galarraga himself – Joyce in tears – a grown man – crying – apparently there is crying in baseball – it was a poignant moment – and it spoke to me – because it captured a lot about how I was feeling as a Jew this past week. And if – he had to suffer only the angry cries of baseball fans – imagine how we felt – when it was not about a game – but life and death itself, the future of Israel itself, the future of the Jewish people itself that was at stake – and we were hearing the boos and condemnations of millions the world over – I too felt like crying.

So here is what I would like to do with you in the next few minutes. I want to teach you a little torah. I want to use that torah to help us cut through a lot of the clutter that is distracting us and making it difficult to see the real issues that now confront us and then once having identified the *ikar* from the *tafeyl* – the essential from the tangential – once we have eliminated the noise and identified the issues – I hope to leave you with some reason to hope. The easiest thing I could do (and I have no doubt there are many rabbis the world over who will be doing just this) – is to pound the table and preach about the unfairness of the world; the easiest thing – and I have no doubt that many rabbis will be doing this as well – is to focus on the hopelessness of our dilemma and the intractable nature of the problems that confront us the chancellor observed that 30 years ago when he sat in the cafes of Israel arguing with his friends over the problems that beset the State of Israel – everyone had their opinion and everyone believed they had the solution to the problems of the day; today when he sits with his friends in the cafes arguing over the problems – everyone still has their opinions but no one – no one believes that they have a solution. Such is the contemporary mood and clarity and optimism are in short supply – but it is nothing less than that which I hope to achieve with you this morning. I hope to offer a little clarity and a little optimism.

First the torah: today we read and studied *parshat Shelach Lecha* – it contains the memorable episode of the *meraglim* – the 12 spies that Moses sends out to reconnoiter the land: *vayedaber adonai el moshe laymor* – The Lord spoke to Moses saying, “Send men to scout the land of Canaan which I am giving to the Israelite people...” It should not be lost on any of us – that we read today words that were spoken some 3200 years ago – and it is the same issue – of a Jewish place in that very land that fills the front pages of our newspapers 3200

years later. You know the story – 12 spies tour the land, one leader from each of the 12 tribes of Israel – they come back and deliver their report: “We came to the land you sent us to; it does indeed flow with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. But (“but” is never a word you want to have in such a report) but, the people who inhabit the country are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large... -- and so far all 12 of the spies are in total agreement – but here is where they diverge into a majority and minority report – 10 of the 12 conclude – “we cannot attack that people, for it is stronger than we.” And two, Joshua and Caleb dissent and say: “Let us by all means go up, and we shall gain possession of it, for we shall surely overcome it.” And the result was that the entire people are agitated by the report of the 10 – they rise up in angry protest and they were ready to abandon the endeavor that had occupied them since they left Egypt.

Why the difference in opinion? Why the wildly different conclusions? They all saw the same thing. They all agreed on what they had seen. But they came to radically different conclusions: 10 said the land is unconquerable and two said it was? How did that happen? Well fortunately the torah gives us more information into how they formed their opinions. Chapter thirteen ends with the following verse: *V'sham ra-inu et hanefilim b'nai anak min han'filim – v'n'hi v'eyneynu kachagavim, v'cheyn hayinu b'eyneyhem.* “All the people that we saw in this land are men of great size, we saw Nephilim there – the Anakites are part of the Nephilim – and we looked like grasshoppers to ourselves, and so we must have looked to them.”

And the rabbis jump all over this last verse – this statement reveals that the core problem for the 10 was not a failure of power but a failure of will – “we looked like grasshoppers to ourselves, and so we must have looked to them.” It was bad enough they lacked faith in themselves – but how could they possibly have known what they looked like in the eyes of the enemy? In fact – we will read later in Chapter 22 that the enemy was terrified of the Israelites and we know that in fact they were able to conquer the land – how could these ten have been so wrong? Well – one truth that we all come to learn sooner or later is that if you believe you can't, you won't. Or as one wit put it in defining prejudice as a, “labor saving device” – it enables one to form opinions without bothering to dig up the facts. But here, in our torah portion we have this taken one step further – they had in fact bothered to dig up the facts but they still found away to impose their beliefs over those facts.

What were the facts – well the fact was that the land was conquerable. How do we know that? Well, because they did, in fact, conquer it. So how did those 10 get it so wrong? They allowed their prejudice, their beliefs to influence the facts when it should be the facts that influence our beliefs. Don't confuse me with the facts, my mind is made up – could well have been the bumper sticker on the back of the 10 spies horses.

There are two types of people in the world: those who allow the facts to shape their opinions and those who allow their opinions to shape the facts. And I am not a big fan of the latter – and if today's torah portion teaches us anything – neither is God. Those 10 spies almost ended the Jewish enterprise just as it was getting started. Those 10 spies and their prejudice almost upended the greatest experiment in world history. Those 10 spies failed because they allowed the facts to be shaped by their beliefs.

Within hours of the tragic events of this past Monday when Israeli soldiers descended to the deck of a Turkish ship to interdict its attempt to break the Israel blockade of Gaza – we were inundated with opinions about what had happened. In the first few hours and days the

condemnations rained down on Israel from around the world. Angry demonstrations broke out in the Middle East and in capitals all over Europe. Israel was denounced in a cascade of angry rhetoric – once again she was likened to Nazis and linked with the worst oppressors in modern history. It was indeed tough to be a Jew – and be on the receiving end of such hatred and vitriolic condemnation – from around the world.

And to a much lesser extent – but similarly – within minutes, certainly hours – we also had our inboxes filled with voices of some of our fellow Jews – defending Israel, condemning her critics – legitimizing events that had taken place.

And the thing that bothered me was that all of this was happening long before anyone knew what had really happened – long before we had the facts. Here we were on Tuesday and Wednesday, Thursday and Friday – and all of this debate was raging – to be honest – most of it on the side of condemnation – and when people asked me what is my take – you would have merely heard in the midst of all the shouting and yelling a quiet voice saying – “why don’t we wait and see what in fact happened.” To be quite honest – we still don’t know all the facts. I think we are beginning to get the picture and we will know more in the days and weeks to come – and when we know what happened I suspect that it will be clear that this was not one of Israel’s proudest days but it will also be clear that what happened bears no resemblance to the hateful and destructive caricature that was portrayed by so many in the world who are so eager to believe the worst about Israel. I believe that because I know the kinds of young people that make up the Israeli Army and I know that they are not capable of the kinds of things they are being accused of. But, for their accusers, the facts are not all that relevant – their mind is made up, no need to confuse them with the facts.

There are a depressingly large number of people in the world who believe that Israel can do no right and for these people the facts will be found to support their belief. And there are also a small but disappointing number of people who believe that Israel can do no wrong – they too will muster the facts necessary to support their belief. And like the 10 spies of old – these people are really not all that helpful.

Having said this – I must now pause for an important aside. We Jews have always prided ourselves on being smart – now is not the time to change character. We have enough real enemies in the world without adding imaginary ones to the list. I believe the Chancellor is right when he says this is one of the scariest times in Jewish history – we have good reason to worry – but that being said this country and this administration and the New York Times are not the enemy – and we do not help our cause when we paint them as such.

If there is any good news that emerges from this past week it was the enormous restraint that was displayed in the pronouncements of our government. When the whole world was rising up in condemnation – they did not. Look do I wish the Obama Administration was more outspoken in its support of Israel? You bet I do. Do I worry that their foreign policy may be misguided and do significant damage to the cause of Israel – yes I do, and as a strong and vibrant American Jewish community we must do everything within our power to make our case and promote our cause. But I do not believe Obama is the enemy? And I believe we do our cause an incredible disservice when we paint him as such. The New York Times was a pretty mixed bag this past week – it published some articles I was very glad saw the light of day like those by Amos Oz and Daniel Gordis and some I wish had not. Their editorial position was far from where I would like it to have been but it certainly could have been much worse. Do I think

the Times is getting it wrong – frequently yes but I don't think they are anti-Semitic and I don't think they are the enemy.

My beloved Jews – we have enemies – serious, powerful and well-organized enemies – and we need to prepare ourselves for the battles that are to come – but it just does not help our cause when we turn everyone who does not agree with us into the enemy. What distinguishes Obama and this administration and the Times from so many of those who are in fact the enemy – is that I believe they are sincerely trying to look at the facts and form their opinions based on those facts. I do not believe they intend us harm, or seek to destroy us – I think they get it wrong at times (newsflash – so do we sometimes) and when the President of the United States gets it wrong – it can have disastrous consequences for a tiny nation that depends on the United States as its only dependable ally – so we have to lobby and advocate and argue with all of our might and all of our energy to try and make sure they do not get it wrong – but they are not the enemy!

If there was any solace that comes out of this incredibly dark week – it was how steadfast was the support of America. Yes, there were a few weak protests organized by pro-Palestinian supporters – but unlike Europe and the Middle East where these protests were supported by overwhelming numbers of the native population and their governments – here they found little sympathy and little support. The fact is that we have something very special here in America – they do not hate us – and we should not take that for granted. Congressman Gary Ackerman – our congressman issued a statement blasting the international condemnation of Israel and supporting Israel's right to self-defense. Did you send him a letter of appreciation? But you will protest, he is one of us. Yes and no. He is a congressman in the United States House of Representatives and he is our congressman – and he was not the only one – and we do have much to be thankful for in this great country – that is all that I am saying. When things are bad – there is no need to make them worse.

So I have suggested that there are two types of people in the world: those who let the facts dictate their opinions – like Joshua and Caleb and those who let their opinions dictate the facts – like the 10 spies. And those proportions have it about right – the world seems to be dominated by prejudice and the desire to believe the worst.

So where is this message of hope I promised at the outset of my comments?

Well – look how the story ends. Ok – they are going to wander in the wilderness for 40 years – and they are going to have to wait for a new generation to be born – one that knows how to dream, one that is not burdened by past prejudices and inherited bias – it will take time – but in the end – the 2 win out over the 10 – the facts win out over the prejudice – the story ends with out entry into the Promised Land.

They made an awful lot of mistakes on their journey to the Promised Land – and today's torah portion contains a doosey – but they learned from their mistakes (Joshua will only send out two spies when he prepares to enter the land) and they became stronger and wiser because of them. And so must we – but the one thing they did not do was loose faith and neither can we. We have heard a lot of late about the rights of the Palestinian People – and that is a political and moral reality we Jews are going to have to learn to deal with. But, we Jews have rights as well. We have a right to live, in our land, securely and free from fear. We have a right to fulfill our national destiny as well. We have a right – *l'hiyot am hofshe – b'artzeinu – a free people, living in our own land – b'erezt zion uvyerushalayim*

Shver size in a yid – yes it was a tough week to be a Jew – but that's ok – we Jews do tough well. Because we have lived to see our dream fulfilled and we will not allow that dream to be denied.

God willing in a little over three weeks I will board a plane and head for Israel – I will walk the streets of a vital and vibrant Jewish state – filled with challenges and problems yes – but filled with life and vitality. I will sit with my friends in cafes and we will argue politics and bemoan the difficulty of being a Jew – but we will laugh and celebrate the sheer wonder and miracle of the modern State of Israel – in a sad and depressing week it is important to remember that we are a fortunate and blessed generation – what your ancestors would have given for the privilege to wrestle with the challenges and problems of a Jewish state. I invite you to please rise and join me in the singing of *Hatikvah* – *od lo avda tkvateynu* – we have not yet lost our hope, not even close.