

Shelach Lecha	Send For Yourself
Torah:	Numbers 13:1-15:41
Haftarah:	Joshua 2:1-24
Brit Chadashah:	Hebrews 3:7-4:11

Our people have finally arrived at their staging camp from which they are to launch their conquest of the Holy Land. The account in Deuteronomy says that it was the people who requested that spies be sent in order to find out what they would be up against. The account in Numbers does not mention this expression of uncertainty, but reluctance among the people was apparently growing. After all, they had it pretty good in the wilderness. They did not have to plant or harvest. They had shade all day and a big night light after dark. They were given quail and we learn later that their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell.

How do you feel when the L-rd says that it is time to move on? After I graduated from Bible College and seminary, I had built up quite a reputation as a preacher and there was a possibility of a temporary staff position with the college. Patti was establishing herself as a singer and our baby son was really enjoying family and friends. I was tired after studying and working full time and my Parisian French meant that I almost had a new language to learn.

But, we had a calling, so we rented a U-Haul and drove into the unknown with all of its potential for joy and grief. I am glad that we did not hang back, even though I know we could have just as easily served the L-rd in Western Canada. But a large part of serving the L-rd is going where you are called, even if involves a lot of risks and the potential for setbacks. Sometime I will tell you all about some of our adventures and heartbreaks in La Belle Province. Too many believers do not go when they are called and do not stay put so they can bloom where they are planted. Enduring spiritual stability is more than worth its weight in gold. We came back sick and broke, but we had such an amazing time that after 30 years I still miss it! In our Messiah we have no regrets about our decision to serve where He sent us.

Twelve leaders of the people were selected to explore the land. In the Bible, the twelve tribes are listed at least seven times for a variety of reasons. The Talmud tends to assign mystical values to the various listings of the tribes, but if you add meaning to the Bible which it does not intend, you will miss the meaning which it does intend. Often, a number is just a number.

These guys were the cream of the crop and included good men like Joshua and Caleb. They were not selected for their exceptional speaking ability or because they possessed exceptional virtue, despite the claims which the Talmud has no business making. They were to enter the land from the south and explore the extensive hill country.

They were given a sixfold task. They were to see: (1) whether the people were strong or weak. (2) Whether the people were small or great in number. (3) Whether land was good or bad. (4) Whether the cities were open or fortified. (5) Whether the land was fat or thin. And finally (6) whether the land had trees or not.

They were told to be courageous and to return with some of the land's produce. They were going into the land in high summer when some of the harvesting was beginning. It was not a military action and a small group of people were sent in, and they would have not attracted a lot of attention. The ten false spies may just have been collecting material to make their case.

They were gone for 40 days and saw all the regions of the whole country. But when they began to give their report, there was trouble. They said it was indeed a land which flowed with milk and honey, so wading across streams would have been a sticky business! The ten spies began a long: "Yes, but", speech which began by describing the people as mighty and ferocious and the cities as all fortified. They said the task was impossible and the people began to murmur against Moses and Aaron. Which side did the seventy elders take? Did the Levites have to protectively surround Moses again? Whose side are you on today?

Just a note. When the ten spies say that it was a land which devours its inhabitants, it meant that it was made up of various invading groups which were never quite able to fully displace all the original inhabitants and could only chase them up into the hills. There were also giants, before whom the spies felt like grasshoppers. Do you have any of these in your life?

Joshua and Caleb tried to encourage the people, because with G-d, they would be able to do this, but the people refused to listen. Instead, they shouted and cried all one night, with ten of the leaders egging them on as they built up a head of steam to disobey. They were being hypnotized by the obstacles instead of concentrating on the power and provision of G-d. How about you? Our G-d is bigger than Covid and we should not listen to those conspiracy theorists who say that governments around the world are using the crisis to take away our rights and set up a global dictatorship which they will turn over to the false prophet and the Beast. Making a mountain out of a mole hill, prevents you from seeing the real mountains.

People, and even believers, can be talked into anything and talked out of anything, if they listen to the wrong people who delight in putting together false, exaggerated scenarios. Learning to listen to reliable people is a good spiritual discipline, as is learning how to identify them. Question. Are you a reliable person or do you often think the sky is falling? I do not call it fake news, just Fox news - I sometimes wonder if that also includes the media network by the same name. The Kingdom will come when all things are ready and not before.

The people lamented the fact that they had not just died in Egypt or in the wilderness. They had convinced themselves that YHVH had brought them to Canaan so they could be slaughtered and have their women and children be taken captive. They even talked about stoning Moses and appointing another leader to take them back to Egypt, where it was safe and there was lots of food. Retreating into your comfort zone is not a good strategy.

Moses and Aaron (and perhaps the seventy leaders) prostrate themselves before the people to try and get them back under control before it is too late. Don't ever let panic and fear, cause you to lose control and make you stop trusting the L-RD. Trials and great tribulation may come as the Good Shepherd leads you through any number of shadowy valleys of death, but He will never leave you nor forsake you. The straight and narrow may be a bumpy road, but those who walk it are heaven bound and have really got nothing to worry about.

Joshua and Caleb try to dissuade the people and get them out of their panicked frame of mind. They said that because they were called by the G-d who had lead them through the wilderness, they would succeed in conquering the land. This only made the people angrier and they spoke of stoning the two spies. They could not defeat their arguments, so they wanted to kill them to shut them up. Too often, when people disagree with you and do not want to hear your arguments, they practice character assassination instead. I know of one house group in Edmonton which spends most of their time talking about how wrong I am about nearly anything. They won't talk to me because they say that I won't listen to them.

What they mean is that I will not agree with them, so they try and sound noble by claiming that I will not listen to them. I do listen, but I evaluate what I listen to, to see how much merit it has and especially if what is being said is backed up with the Scriptures or runs counter to them. Too many believers believe such strange, weird things which are not at all scriptural.

During the week, I got the strangest phone call. A native person called and said that he wanted to teach me about Judah. He was a Salish native and said that many similarities existed between Salish words and the Hebrew of the Bible. He tried to say that Judah meant red and that members of his tribe were the true tribe of Judah. He was not open to be challenged and said that I did not accept his teaching because I was not a red member of the true tribe of Judah. Since the conversation was going nowhere, I terminated it without any inclination to examine the nonsense he was teaching any further. Beware of foolish nonsense.

This is not the first time I have encountered the supposed Hebraic origins of Native peoples, but it was the first time that someone claimed that they were the true "red" Jews and I was not really a Jew. He interpreted my lack of interest as some kind of inability to understand, but however you look at it, wrapping up a lie in noble sounding language, does not make it any less of a lie. Sounding friendly and sincere is not always an indication of being truthful.

The rebellious agenda of the people was becoming unstoppable and then the glory of the L-rd appeared before the tabernacle and Moses was called inside. The startled people do not try and hinder Moses because they had more than a healthy respect for the lethal nature of the Presence. Going in uninvited was a death sentence. Moses was still the chosen leader.

YHVH states that He is willing to exterminate the people and rebuild a nation from Moses and probably also out of the people who were siding with him. Again, we are not told where the seventy elders stood, or if the tribe of Levi still stood with Moses or had joined the ranks of the rebels. Do not be carried away high sounding departures from biblical truth.

Moses makes a twofold intercession on behalf of the people and is successful in turning away the deadly wrath of G-d. He first says that if the camp is incinerated, the Canaanites would say that YHVH was not powerful enough to bring this fractious people into Canaan (Moses' Jewishness is showing!). The camp was likely under constant observation because it was obviously another potential invasion threat to the people of Canaan. The camp was not set up in secret and the people's intention to take possession must have been well known.

Moses goes on to recite the thirteen attributes of YHVH, beginning with His being slow to anger and rich in goodness. He reminds the L-RD of the greatness of His power which He has already shown in the wilderness. He also says that YHVH forgives iniquity and rebellion but also punishes sin in all the living generations of those who have succumbed to it.

His intercession spared the people from imminent death and they are forgiven, but this generation has forfeited its right to enter the land. His sentence is severe, but fair. They will turn back into the wilderness and die in it as they wanted to do and only their children will be allowed to enter the Holy Land. Since the spies spent forty days exploring the land, this generation who listened to the negative report of the ten spies, will spend forty years wandering around in the wilderness they had just traveled through. The ten spies are struck dead by a plague which came from the L-RD and only Joshua and Caleb will live to enter the land with the next generation. Repentance was granted, but they still had to reap what they had sown. We need to be careful about what we are sowing in our lives, because even though we may be forgiven, we may also reap what we have sown. What are you sowing?

When the life sentence verdict is given to the people and when they see the ten spies struck dead by G-d, they suddenly have a change of heart and are now willing to enter the land. It is not a true repentance but only an attempt to avoid the severe judgment which they have just received and deserved. Now that they are told that they will not be allowed to enter the land, their repentance coated, disobedience, pushes them into a noble sounding form of further disobedience. They were still going to do what they were told not to do. How about you?

They were not happy with the prospect of entering the land and now they are less happy with the prospect of spending the rest of their lives wandering in the wilderness. They form up into their legions and present themselves before Moses in an attempt to get his blessing.

They are told the ark would not be leading them and they know better than trying to force it to lead the way. Sinfulness is born of stubbornness, but the righteous stubbornness of G-d stands even more firm. Against the advice of Moses and likely without the help of the two remaining spies, the people charge into the land and they are cut to pieces. We are not told how many of them were killed in this failed attempt, but it becomes clear to the survivors that without the presence of G-d preceding them, they do not stand a chance of entering the land.

They are driven back to the camp, but there is no Canaanite assault on the camp. They may have defeated the people, but they were not willing to take on the fiery Presence which hovered above the tabernacle. The Presence of G-d can never suffer defeat even when His people experience defeat at the hands of their enemies. If I knew that the Presence of G-d was not going to accompany me as I walked through any of the highways and byways of this life, I would stay put in the only safe place this life has to offer – on His Presence. And that means staying where I am told to stay, experiencing the protection and provision of the Presence. YHVH rewards faithful obedience and not courageous disobedience.

Learning to stay put is the safest lesson we can learn. When G-d says “no”, He means it, not because there is anything which He cannot do – there are just some things which He is unwilling to do. Repentance needs to be a full submission to both the will of G-d and to the Word of G-d. It should never be an attempt to get G-d to do what He has already said that He would not do. We need to put up good fight, until YHVH wins us over to His side.

In chapter 15, we see that instructions for life in the land continue as if the failed entrance had never happened. G-d's purposes advanced unimpeded by opposition and human failure. Once they are in the land and have grain to offer as a regular sacrifice, instructions are given as to how these offerings were to proceed. They also include instructions about wine and oil offerings, which would have come from future grain and fruit harvests.

During their long sojourn wandering around in the wilderness, the lost generation would still have been required to keep the Sabbath and follow the festival cycle, with the possible exceptions of the three pilgrimage festivals, which were harvest based. Without settling in the land and without making harvests, they would have nothing to offer.

However, neither Passover, nor the Festival of Unleavened Bread are harvest based celebrations. As well, neither Rosh HaShanah, nor Yom Kippur are harvest festivals and could be celebrated in the wilderness where no harvests were taken in. It may have been that the wandering generation would have kept the three pilgrimage festivals empty handed, but in full anticipation of future harvests which their children would one day bring in. Our lives need to be led in full and constant anticipation of the irresistible coming Kingdom.

We learn later that the older, rejected generation, did not circumcise any of the boys who were born during the wandering years. After the next generation crossed the Jordan, this massive task would be performed by those men who were 20 and under when the wandering began. After the wandering, they would be seniors and would perform the ritual under the supervision of Joshua. We are not told if the Levites also abstained from circumcising any children who were born to them during the wandering years. However, to this day, the hill where this mass circumcision was performed is called the hill of foreskins in Arabic.

During the wandering years, the people's basic needs would still be met. They still got manna every morning, six days a week. They also were provided with quail and always had access to an adequate water supply. They had shade during the day and a night light after dark. Also their feet did not swell and their clothes did not wear out. They would live as shepherds and likely be able to trade for what they could not yet grow. Later, while they are still at the failed staging point, there are a few more rebellions which Moses dealt with before they turned back into the wilderness. The day they packed up to head back into the wilderness is one of the saddest days in our people's long history. Self defeat is always one of the saddest defeats.

More instructions stipulate that strangers dwelling in their midst who wanted to offer sacrifices, had to follow the same ordinances as the indigenous. This was so that scattered little pockets of paganism did not spring up among the people. There is no indication that these scattered pockets of strangers abandoned the camp when the people turned back into the wilderness. Wandering as an exile in the L-RD is always better than going back to the folly and darkness of the world. Dwelling in or near His Presence is the only place to live.

Instructions are also given for future offerings of the first fruit of their dough which was going to be baked. A portion of the dough always had to be given to the priests and Levites, who would then bake it and eat it. During time when the people lived off the manna, did they leaven it? Since they could not keep any manna overnight it is likely that any leavening which was added, was added early enough in the day so it would have time to rise. So if it was added, it had to be added first thing in the morning when the manna was harvested.

Once they are in the land and sin involuntarily, by not keeping all of the commandments and stipulations (sin by omission), future rituals are mentioned so that both the people and the strangers who camped with them could be forgiven. They would also be empowered to rise above their mistakes and grow into full obedience. Are you also learning to rise above your mistakes? What kind of obedience are you growing into? Is your life full of omissions?

Atonement is still to be offered to any Jew or any stranger who commits an involuntary infraction, but if either a Jew or a stranger rise up to defy the commandments of YHVH, they are to be cut off from the camp. We are not told if being cut off meant being just expelled or killed, but given the vile danger of any form of rebellion, I would think that they would be killed.

Right after this series of stipulations, a man is found violating the Sabbath by collecting fire wood on this special day. He is judged and executed by stoning. We are not told exactly when this occurred, but even during the wandering years the people had to keep the Sabbath and violation of this commandment was punishable by death. Sabbath observance is one of the central forms of obedience and even in the New Testament there is no indication that the the L-rd's Day was changed from the seventh day of the week, to the first day of the week. Saturday is and always has been the only Day of the L-rd which the Scriptures recognize.

Stoning was never a common form of execution in Israel, and it was only performed after the community had a firm confirmation that a stoning crime had been committed. In other portions of the Torah, we learn that stoning was first instituted for those who violated the limits of Mount Sinai. Again, this was not because YHVH was shy or nervous, but because when someone violated the limits they would be struck dead and their dead body would have to be removed. Stoning them would be easier than retrieving their dead body later.

People who offered their children to Moloch were also stoned along with those who blasphemed. People who tried to induce others to join them in worshiping false gods were stoned to keep idolatry from ever getting a foothold in the camp. When a man raped a virgin betrothed to another man, if this occurred in a town or city, they were both stoned. She was stoned for not crying out and he was stoned for the sexual crime he willingly committed. If the rape occurred in the fields where no one could have heard her, even if she had cried out, only the man was stoned. Sin needs to be taken very seriously and while we no longer stone offenders, they either repent or are no longer welcome in our midst. No one wearing an ankle bracelet as a sex offender is allowed to attend our shul and even though they are legally required to keep a considerable distance from children, we are not willing to put any of ours at risk. They are forgiven but we not prepared to put our children at risk to accommodate them.

The passage ends with a reference to the fringes which were to be attached to the edges of their clothing. Since the styles of clothing have changed and few people now wear robes any more, we have come up with a fringed tallit or scarf which is worn over our clothes. In our shul, ladies have the choice of putting on a tallit or wearing a head covering, though neither one is mandatory for either men or women. Helpful does not always mean mandatory.

Wearing fringes on your clothing was to be a mnemonic, or memory device, given so that all of our generations would remember both all the commandments and also, that there is only one acceptable kind of service we can offer to the L-RD - full time and not selective. We are never to add to or delete from the Word and we are also to remember that we have been delivered out of Egypt, not just for our convenience, but in order that we would become and remain servants of YHVH. Truly, service to YHVH is the sole purpose of life for all believers.

At first, chapter 15 appears to be out of sequence in between several rebellions, but it is really just a reminder that our devotion to the L-RD must be complete and should never be defined by our setbacks. Our devotion to YHVH should be steady and should also be based entirely on both remembering His commandments and on putting them completely into practice.

This chapter is also very forward looking, as it deals with conditions which will only start to apply, once the new generation has settled into the land. It was also given so that the lost generation knew what they would be missing out on, and so they had better make sure the next generation does not follow in their negative foot steps. The glory of our exodus from Egypt is not diminished, neither is the wonder and the glory of receiving the commandments. The hovering presence would still guide them through the wilderness, because our people's eventually destination will always be to enter the land. Future generations needed to be reminded to always obey the voice of YHVH and to make their lives revolve around the festival cycle, which celebrates both the provision and the protection of our L-RD. For those who have learned to walk with the L-RD, His amazing Shepherding provisions of Ps. 23 will always apply in all and any circumstances of our lives. Shabbat Shalom and Shavua Tov.