



Attachment and Resentment
Torah Reflections on Parashat Shelah
Numbers 13:1 – 15:41
16 Sivan 5774 June 14, 2014

In this week's Torah portion, *Shelah*, Moses sends the spies into the land of Canaan at God's recommendation (Numbers 13). Commentators have pondered why it was crucial to send the spies in the first place. Was it not enough that God had already determined, stated, and promised the Israelite's place of destination? Their homeland was awaiting them, but rather than trusting God's promise and being divinely escorted into the land of Canaan, the people request to send their elite leaders to spy out the land (see Deuteronomy 1:22).

When the spies return, their initial response seems to be objective. They inform the crowd that they did indeed arrive to their destination. They mention that the land flows with milk and honey, and they display samples of gargantuan fruit that they collected and brought back into the Wilderness with them. The first part of their presentation is rather glowing, but then there is one word, one simple conjunction that throws this glowing presentation off its course. Following the spies' positive description of the land and showing the fruit samples, the next word is "*efes*" (but). When we hear the word "but", there is often another more negative side of the story to be told. "I love you but..." "Everything was wonderful but..." Following the conjunction, the spies suddenly exclaim the more negative attributes of the land as they see it, ever decreasing the small amount of objectivity they may have been able to muster in the beginning. Everything that follows this "*efes*" contributes to the growing doubt and unease the Israelites feel over entering their Promised Land. For instance, the spies relay their subjective impression that the land is filled with "giants" in fortified cities. The implication is that military might, fighting, and struggle will be required to cross the threshold into Canaan—and even then success is not guaranteed. In Numbers 14:1-3 the Israelites weep all night, "murmur against their leaders Moses and Aaron," lament that they did not die in Egypt or in the Wilderness, and express fear over the struggle and fight they are about to encounter. The report spawns a national anger, fear and hysteria about the homeless nation's future.

The word *efes* also connotes nothingness. In contemporary Hebrew it is translated as zero or nothing. In biblical Hebrew the word may be rendered as cessation, worthlessness, non-existence, lacking, without, and the list goes on, but all imply a sense of deficiency or absence.

Throughout their time in the wilderness nothing more than God's miraculous nurturing is responsible for the survival of the Israelite nation. Biblical text illuminates that even the thought of leaving the wilderness and stepping into this new Promised Land, in which there are resources for greater degrees of self-sufficiency, may be more traumatizing than the thought of returning to Egypt to become slaves again (Numbers 11:18). The transition into the Promised Land marks a separation from a dependence on God for manna, water, and the cloud hovering over the *mishkan* (Sanctuary) as the desert is

traversed. Of course the Israelites *kvetch* about the manna and yearn for the produce, meats, and familiarity of their place of enslavement. There is a dual dynamic of dependence on and resentment of God. While they dislike their reliance on God, one of their fears is that when they step into a more independent role, God will step into the realm of *efes*, nothingness, and they will be left alone in a strange new environment.

This dynamic of resentment and attachment also surfaces in the hearts and minds of many who are healing and transitioning into newly gained independence. We witness the anxiety and fear (fused with doses of enthusiasm) that people experience when they are being set free from a medical environment—when they are expected to return to a more independent existence. Sometimes we may lose self-confidence and we begin to lose faith in our caretakers, whether they are professionals or intimate people in our lives, when they begin to push us toward autonomy by retracting themselves. This retraction, or *tzim-tzum*, to whatever degree it takes place, may be exactly what we need to progress. It certainly does not mean that the connection to those who have cared for us branches into the realm of nothingness. Rather, the transition into a less dependant relationship—while ultimately bringing us to a better place—may also leave us with a feeling of loss and fear for the future.

The spies are often criticized in the commentaries for their lack of faith and trust in God. It is similarly not unheard of for us to criticize someone's resentful and yet needy dependence on others when they are attempting to heal from a formerly debilitating circumstance. In addition, it is also not unusual for us to criticize ourselves for being needy when experiencing the retraction of another. In comparing our own lives to the text, most of us have played both roles; that of the doubting spy who anticipates the future with fear, and that of Moses, who out of love and frustration urges us toward independence. The growthful balance may be found in discovering what exists in between the miracle of being provided for and the *efes* of change. Reacquainting ourselves with the ordinary challenges in daily life may restore us to ourselves, to others, and to God. Perhaps this dynamic of attachment and resentment is an organic aspect of healing. We often gain physical and emotional restoration as we endure those very challenges that can make day-to-day existence so grueling during a recovery process. After we have traveled through our own wilderness of change and have built a new home within ourselves, we can then see how the influence of others and our own strengths escorted us into a new territory of promise.

© Bay Area Jewish Healing Center, Rabbi Rochelle Robins



This Torah Reflection was written by Rabbi Rochelle Robins, Dean of the Chaplaincy School and Director of Clinical Pastoral Education, Academy for Jewish Religion in Los Angeles. The Torah Reflections series is published by the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center, a beneficiary of the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties. More information and healing-oriented resources can be found at www.JewishHealingCenter.org.

