

## D'var Torah Nidhe Israel

**Shlach: “And the LORD spoke unto Moses, saying: ‘Send thou men, that they may spy out the land of Canaan, which I give unto the children of Israel; of every tribe of their fathers shall ye send a man, every one a prince among them.’ (Numbers 13:1-2).**

As the portion of *Shlach* opens, we read how God commands the Israelites to send ahead men to spy out and explore the land of Israel. We know the tragic results of this "spy" mission. The report, which emerges from 10 out of 12, is negative and discouraging, which only serves to divert the Israelites from their God-given mission of the conquest of the Land of Israel.

This tragic transgression, as taught by our Sages, has been responsible for some of the destructions and Jewish sufferings which subsequently occurred. And we see, even now that although there is a Jewish State, that we still experience a lack of faith - not in the ability to keep developing and running a homeland - but in taking brave steps **in trying to achieve peace with our neighbours.** Israel **could, for instance, try and experiment in reaching out to her neighbours by** dismantling the settlements like Menachem Begin did when he returned Sinai to Egypt, and thus see to what and where it leads to. Will the world and the Arab nations notice and if so how would they react? Indeed it was Menachem Begin who not only returned Sinai to the Egyptians but also created Gaza which of course is a problem but nevertheless the most hawkish of the hawkish of Israeli prime Ministers has created the change.

I believe that Israel is still strong both within and without to withstand and defend herself. Indeed it was on the 5th June 1967 at 7.10 in the morning, some 53 years ago, when Israel's Air force struck to do just that. By 7.30am there were close to 200 planes aloft. They were flying low, fifteen meters apart, to avoid detection. The aim was to reach the Egyptian coast without being spotted. Most of the information about the Egyptian air force was obtained by Wolfgang Lotz, a German born Israeli spy who posed as an ex SS officer who was however captured in 1964. Almost all of Egypt's planes were on the ground. The Israeli pilots swooped down from 9000 feet - open at that point to the Egyptian radar. But it was too late for them and Egyptian air force runways, long range bombers as also the jet fighters were all destroyed.

The war was over in six days hence the name The Six Day War of 1967. Amongst Jews throughout the world, there was a feeling of incredible elation and Israel has changed from a poor developing country to a country building its economy. In 1966 many Israelis were still using orange boxes for their dining table and many who came post Holocaust and from Middle Eastern countries lived in poverty.

The victory would not have happened had the Israelites listened to - as it were to the ten spies who preached doom and gloom. The saying 'Who dares win' makes sense in this and other contexts.

However as Israel became more prosperous it also became careless in many directions and hence when the Yom Kippur War of 1973 came about Israel was unprepared. I have never seen more devastation than when I visited Israel as a

young Rabbi from West London Synagogue to raise money for her. My trip was in January 1974, the war still on in the Sinai and the amount of injured was overwhelming Israeli hospitals.

I will never forget what I saw in the Sinai and on the Golan Heights during that visit, as well as the depressive spirit which prevailed in Israel - not seen since perhaps the time of the destruction of the Second Temple of Jerusalem in the year 70 CE. We have learned from the story of the 12 Spies, and subsequently from The Six Day and Yom Kippur Wars that neither cowardice, nor overconfidence are helpful but to have courage, determination and a will which can bring with it success and hope. This is what happened in the War of Independence of 1948 and in the 1967 War.

This is not what we are seeing today in Israel when Knesset discusses whether to annex some of the lands on the West Bank, captured from Jordan in 1967. Surely if that happens and becomes a reality it will end hopes of a Two-State system and probably result in expulsions and violence. It is neither helpful, nor I believe will it bring either security or a better future for Israel, and certainly not for the Palestinians.

This week's Torah portion is also about the Tablets which Moses brought down from Mount Sinai - the teaching which has penetrated every culture and civilised society - the moral teaching and philosophical approach to life became the cornerstone - if you pardon the pun - of civilisation.

There is no doubt that we need to participate in our lives with courage and conviction if we are to develop as human beings and achieve what we have set out to achieve and accomplish.

The story of the spies shows the bravery of the few and not the many and this what we need to emulate. Today, we also see the difficulties which our society is experiencing, not only through the Covid 19 virus and its repercussions, but also through the appalling way the US police have behaved in an inhumane and uncaring way with George Floyd, and many others before him, which has led rise to demonstrations throughout the world.

There is no doubt that All Lives Matter-ALL LIVES MATTER. We read in *Sanhedrin 37a* - saving one life is tantamount to saving the whole world - showing and telling us that the value of human life is infinite. Nothing in this world is of higher value or greater ethical import than human life. It is the utmost duty of one human being to save the life of another and that is without borders and without any reservation. One can even break the Sabbath if it means to save someone's life. By inference all other *Torah* laws must also be suspended to save a life.

So there is no doubt in my mind that we need and must speak out for and on behalf of every human. However, the violence that has erupted both here and in the US, and to my mind, what has happened with the tearing down of the statue in Bristol can only lead to more violence and disregard for public property.

I am aware that there are many statues of people who have behaved in a most appalling way some two hundred years ago before the abolition of slavery in 1833. However, to tear them all down - whether violently as has happened in Bristol, or by agreement as the Mayor of London proposes - is perhaps not the answer. I believe that history serves to

remind us of our errors, and for sure there have been many. Should we not consider placing plaques next to these statues, explaining who these people were and what they have done, so that future generations would know ALL the facts. Of course the statues could be taken down and placed in Museums with an explanation but which ones, and where would we stop? There have been so many injustices in the past of all civilisations, including our own. Surely when someone is beholden to Mercedes who in turn for example took over several companies which benefitted from Jewish slave labour, should we stop racing drivers racing in its colours?

Destruction is not an answer but neither is fear. We need to be brave to face the situation whether it be the virus or oppression, but not with violence or blind attacks.

Let us always behave in a civilised manner. James Arthur Baldwin, an American novelist, essayist, playwright, poet, and social critic in the 50s and 60s offered a vital literary voice during the era of civil rights activism. Perhaps he did not realise that the Talmud had said this before him. He said: "Know from whence you came. If you know whence you came, there are absolutely no limitations to where you can go." This knowledge and realisation may lead us to saving the world and saving humanity from its own inhumanness and cowardice.

Shabbat Shalom  
B'Shalom  
Rabbi Thomas