

Sermon by Rabbi Eliezer Hirsch Shelach 20 “Impossible”

Good Shabbos. Shabbat shalom. Over the last few weeks, there have been an unprecedented number of public rallies, and whether you consider the various causes just or not, we have witnessed firsthand how much impact such group efforts can have on our society, despite so many years of effort that produced little change. I think this week’s Parsha bears directly on this phenomenon, because it’s fair to say that the Jewish people were, in a sense, called to action when God **commanded** them to dispatch 12 spies to Israel.

Rashi has a different take on the narrative. He relies on the words *Shlach lecha* to argue that dispatching the spies was merely an option offered by God. That interpretation seems odd, as though Rashi is trying to give God a “pass” so He’s not responsible for the bad outcome.

Moreover, Nachmanides takes issue with the idea that the Jewish people had a choice. He points out that when faced with serious challenges, *ain somchin al hanes* we cannot sit back and rely on a miracle from God. And so he asks, why were they punished for taking action? Why did they suffer the tragic outcome that led to the saddest day on the Jewish calendar, Tisha b’av?

Nachmanides explains that the spies were wrong **not** because they embarked on their mission, but because their report included one fatal word – *efes, zero, impossible* – meaning it would be impossible to defeat the enemy. In other words, the spies tried to convince the Jewish people that attempting to conquer the land of Israel would be a fool’s errand.

The Vilna Gaon teaches that the Evil Inclination has only two pieces of ammunition to dissuade us from taking action. One is the voice warning us, *Your goal is impossible to achieve*. The second bullet, so to speak, is the reassurance that *Even if you could achieve success, you’re not obligated to bother – you’re off the hook*. It is those falsehoods which constitute lashon hara, the language of the yetzer hara, the language of evil itself.

It is commonplace to believe that evil is an active force, but as the Ramchal teaches in his famous work *Mesillat Yisharim, The Path of the Just*, one of the foundations of evil is *atzlut*, laziness, not bothering to take action.

If you fail to plow your field, weeds will grow, solely because you did nothing. An example of this idea is found in the famous words of the Anglo-Irish statesman Edmund Burke,

The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.

We find this lesson in a story I heard from Rabbi Noach Weinberg, who spoke to the owner of a convalescent home where most of the residents were not Jewish, with the exception of one Jewish woman. The owner was told by his Rabbi that he must be sure to feed her kosher food, but she rejected it, saying she did not want to be different from the other residents. He made several attempts to persuade her. He claimed the kosher food tasted better, but she dismissed him, saying she couldn't taste much anyway. He claimed it was healthier, but she countered that she was 95 years old, so what did it matter? Ultimately, however, he did convince her to accept the kosher meals, and Rabbi Weinberg asked him how he did it. He replied, *I have no idea, but I had no choice, so I just made it happen.* I believe that Rabbi Weinberg's lesson from this story is the lesson of our Parsha: There is nothing in life within the realistic realm of your abilities that is impossible to achieve, because God will help you achieve your goals.

We all have the potential to change things. As we said last week, when Moshe asked God, how am I supposed to provide meat for the entire nation? God responded, *Hayad hashem tiktzar? Is the hand of God too short?* In other words, *My power is infinite, so with my help, you can accomplish anything.*

We must always remember that obstacles may seem insurmountable, but with God in our corner, there is almost nothing that is impossible. Shabbat shalom.