

STUDY GUIDE

The Torah: A Women's Commentary

Parashat Sh'lach L'cha Numbers 13:1–15:41

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Parashat Sh'ach L'cha Study Guide Themes

Theme 1: The Scouts—Seeing and Believing

Theme 2: From the Corners—Of Garments and Bread

Introduction



Parashat Sh'lach L'cha takes place at a pivotal moment in the Israelites' wilderness experience. As the people are poised to enter Canaan, twelve scouts are sent out by Moses to survey the destination so long promised, longed-for, and anticipated. At long last the dream meets the reality; the Promised Land is no longer a place of imagination. Rather, it is a very real and tangible site filled with other peoples, vegetation, wildlife, and fortified construction. After a period of both great expectation and enormous travail, ten of the twelve scouts return to Moses deeply disheartened by their findings. Their pessimism does not center on the quality of the land itself or its capacity to sustain the people once they are situated. On the contrary, these scouts report that Canaan "flow[s] with milk and honey" (Numbers 13:27). Their deep discouragement, however, reflects a self-perception of weakness, inadequacy, and powerlessness—and a concomitant inability or refusal to believe that God will ultimately protect them from the fearsome threats that await them there. Only two scouts, Joshua and Caleb, present a confident and positive assessment of the Israelites' chances of survival in the Promised Land. Thus, this part of *parashat Sh'lach L'cha* raises such questions as the following: What is "seeing"? How objective is our vision? What are the factors that sway our perceptions of the world and of ourselves? How do human beings integrate what they objectively "see" with feelings and perception lying deeply within? In such situations, how does the group influence the individual? Can one choose optimism over pessimism, hope over despair? If so, how?

The rest of the parashah concerns an assortment of laws having to do with the sacrificial cult, the commandment to wear fringes (*tzitzit*), and a warning about failure to properly observe the Shabbat. An intriguing theme in the first two of these topics has to do with corners. Both the instructions regarding *challah* (dough offerings) and attaching fringes to one's clothing specify that these actions must take place at a very specific location—the corner. At the end of the parashah, God's commandments are once again sealed with both reminder and warning: "Thus you shall be reminded to observe all My commandments and to be holy to your God. I, *YHVH*, am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God; I, your God *YHVH*" (Numbers 15:40–41).

Before Getting Started



Before turning to the biblical text and the questions presented below, use the introductory material in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* to provide an overview of the parashah as a whole. Draw attention to a few key quotations from the introduction to the Central Commentary on page 869 and/or survey the outline on page 870. This will allow you to highlight some of the main themes in this portion and give participants a context for the sections they will study within the larger parashah. Also, remember that when the study guide asks you to read biblical text, take the time to examine the associated comments in the Central Commentary. This will help you to answer questions and gain a deeper understanding of the biblical text.

Theme 1: The Scouts—Seeing and Believing



In this section, the reader is introduced to the twelve scouts and given a very explicit delineation of their lineages. Moses gives specific instructions to the group, asking for reports on both the human and natural resources of the land that the Israelites will soon enter. As the scouts travel the land, the text paints a picture of lushness and largeness; everything in Canaan, it appears, is oversized. Thus, the Promised Land stands in marked contrast to the desert wilderness that the Israelites have called home. After the scouts return and report their observations, Moses' and Aaron's leadership is once again challenged by an easily terrified and suspicious people. Enraged by their seeming faithlessness, an impassioned God threatens the group with destruction. And, once more, Moses intervenes on behalf of the Israelites and negotiates an arrangement with which God ultimately agrees.

1. Read Numbers 13:1–3, 6, 8, 16–20, in which Moses instructs tribal leaders to explore the land of Canaan.
 - a. According to Nili Sacher Fox's comment on verse 2, what is the meaning of the Hebrew word *anashim*? What are the various ways the word has been translated into English? How does the translation of *anashim* in this Torah commentary impact your understanding of God's charge to these representatives? What difference does it make in your conception of this story to refer to these individuals as "scouts" instead of "spies"?
 - b. According to the comment on "Joshua" in verse 16, what was the original name of the representative from the tribe of Ephraim, and what was it changed to? According to Fox, what might be the reason for the emendation of this name? How might this new name impact Joshua's credibility and ability to lead the people after Moses' death? Turn back to Exodus 6:20, in which Moses' parentage is described. How does it differ from that of Joshua, who will be Moses' successor? What do you think accounts for the difference?
2. Read Numbers 13:21–33, in which the tribal leaders return from their expedition and give their report to Moses and the people.
 - a. What is the length of the scouts' journey? Read Fox's comment on verse 25. What literary and political purposes do you think are served by having this story unfold in

- this particular length of time?
- b. What natural or agricultural findings do the expeditioners describe on their return? What images do these descriptions evoke in you as a reader? What do they make you think of, and how might hearing about them affect a group of desert wanderers?
 - c. What do the scouts say about the people of Canaan? Read Fox's comment on verse 28 about the Anakites. What is Fox's interpretation of the scouts' description of what they saw? Turn back to read Genesis 6:1–4. Who were the Nephilim? How do the creatures described in the Genesis text compare to those reported by the scouts? What is similar and what is different in these depictions?
 - d. By contrast, how do ten of the twelve scouts describe themselves? Why do you think that the scouts utilize nonhuman—animal or mystical—descriptions for themselves and the Canaanite inhabitants they encountered? What kind of self-perception can be gleaned from their comments? If there is some basis to the large size of these people, as Fox considers in her commentary on verse 28, what insight does that provide into the account of the scouts?
 - e. What do the descriptions given by the scouts add to the story? What insight do their accounts provide into their relationship with God? What is the impact of these descriptions on the scouts' report and the "calumnies" that they spread?
 - f. What do you think is behind Caleb's statement to Moses in verse 30? How would you characterize Caleb's reaction to the encounter with the land of Canaan vis-à-vis that of the other scouts? Why do you think he responds differently? What qualities does Caleb exhibit in his response? How does Caleb serve as a model? Can you think of other "Calebs" in Jewish history?
3. Read Rachel Havrelock's *Another View* on page 886, which offers an alternative view of the scouts.
- a. According to Havrelock, how do the positive aspects of the land and its inhabitants become "inverted" and turn into a source of fear and inadequacy for the ten scouts? What accounts for their reaction to the land?
 - b. What is the major premise of the Exodus story that, in Havrelock's view, is challenged in the story of the scouts? How closely is your own understanding of the destiny and mission of the Jewish people associated with a "circumscribed territory"?
 - c. What is the "new identity" that Havrelock cites? In your view, could such an Israelite identity have been tenable at the time of the story? Is it any more or less tenable today?
4. Read *Post-biblical Interpretations* by Anna Urowitz-Freudenstein on pages 886–87.
- a. In her reflection on Numbers 13:2, Urowitz-Freudenstein presents the *Kli Yakar's* commentary on the respective feelings of the men and women of the desert generation about the Land of Israel. Read the proof texts that the *Kli Yakar* utilized. How do the feelings expressed in Numbers 14:4 (by men) compare to those voiced by Zelophehad's daughters in Numbers 27:4?
 - b. Imagine that Moses did not make the "tactical error" suggested by the *Kli Yakar*. Now,

“rewrite” the story of the scouts. What do you think would have been different? The same? How do you envision twelve **women** scouts fulfilling God’s and Moses’ charge in Numbers 13:1–2? What do you think their report back to the people would have sounded like? How does imagining women as the central characters of this story change your appreciation of it?

5. Read Contemporary Reflection on pages 888–89.

- a. In her essay, Josee Wolff defines some essential differences between optimists and pessimists. She also defines one of the messages of this portion as “the challenge to perceive the world in all its nuanced complexity—and not reduce it to simplistic either/or, black/white categories.” Think of a challenging time or experience in your life. How did you approach it? Were you more optimistic or more pessimistic? How nuanced were you able to be in your understanding of the situation? In thinking back, how might you have handled your challenge differently had you been able to utilize a broader perspective such as Wolff describes?
- b. Both the scouts in the parashah and Wolff depict grasshoppers as small, weak, and easily overwhelmed. What other, more positive qualities can you attribute to grasshoppers that, in fact, have “enabled the Jewish people to continue and to thrive”?

6. Read “Sh’lach L’cha” by Laurie Patton in Voices on page 890.

- a. What do you think Patton intends to convey by her capitalization of the word “Vision”?
- b. From whose perspective are the second, third, and fourth stanzas of this poem written? What feeling is suggested in these sections? How would you characterize the relationship between the collective and the individual in this poem? How does that relate to this parashah?
- c. Can you recall a time when you felt similarly in your own life? When was it, and what were the circumstances?
- d. According to Patton, what is the “struggle with scale” that is “always” evoked by a Vision? Why is the essential question, “Shall I belong here?” And why is this the question instead of “Do I belong here?” What different challenges do the two questions express?

Theme 2: From the Corners—Of Garments and Bread



In this section of the parashah, among a miscellany of laws, God reminds the people that the bread that will ultimately nourish them in the land of Canaan will come to them as a gift. Consequently, the people are to acknowledge this gift by hereafter setting aside “the first yield of [their] baking” as a divine offering. Later Jewish tradition stipulated that prior to the baking process, a specific part of the challah dough, the corner, was to be ritually removed, set aside, and a blessing recited over it. God further instructs the Israelites to fasten fringes to the edges of their garments, an act that will serve as a perpetual reminder of their relationship with and obligations to God. Both sets of instructions serve as reminder and warning: the people are in an everlasting relationship that must never be overlooked. And not only that, but both rituals must take place at a corner, a specific, definite, unambiguous place.

1. Read Numbers 15:17–21, in which God commands the people regarding the “gift” of bread.
 - a. Read Fox’s comment on these verses (pp. 882–83). What were the specific obligations of the people concerning dough? To whom was it to be given literally? Figuratively? What was the relationship between these two “gifts”?
 - b. What does the reader glean from these verses about the lives of women in biblical society? Read Genesis 18:6 and Leviticus 26:26 for other descriptions of women and baking. What impressions do these verses convey about the significance of baking bread in the community? What does this imply about the status of women? How does this information challenge your perceptions of women in ancient Israel?
2. Read Numbers 15:37–41, in which God commands Moses regarding the wearing of fringes.
 - a. According to Nili Schechter Fox, what were some of the uses of tassels and fringes in other ancient Near Eastern societies? Who wore them?
 - b. What distinguished ornamental garment tassels from tassels associated with religious dictates? Turn back to Exodus 28:37 and read about the high priests’ headdresses. How might the association of the former with the latter impact the self-concept of those who wore fringes?
 - c. The significance of the word *zachor* in this text is emphasized by its repetition in Numbers 15:39–40. According to Fox’s comment on verse 39, what does the Hebrew verb *zachor* mean, and how is it specifically intended to be understood with regard to wearing fringes? What is the impact of understanding *zachor* to imply action rather than thought?
 - d. In verse 41, God reminds the Israelites that it was God who brought them “out of the land of Egypt to be your God.” What is the connection between the command to wear fringes in verse 38 and the exhortation in verse 41 to remember this pivotal moment in Israelite history?
3. In Post-biblical Interpretations, read Urowitz-Freudenstein’s comment on 15:19 on page 887.
 - a. According to Urowitz-Freudenstein, what was “the mitzvah of *challah*”? How was the commandment fulfilled when the Temple stood, and how did it change after 70 C.E.? Why do you think that the mitzvah of *challah* and the other two mitzvot described in this section emerged as the three key commandments for women?
 - b. The *Sefer haChinuch* expands the meaning of bread baking. How does this interpretation influence your own attitude toward similar domestic tasks?
 - c. Urowitz-Freudenstein explains that, by contrast to the positive estimation of the *Sefer haChinuch*, the midrash *B’reishit Rabbah* 17:8 has a much less positive view of women. According to this midrash, what is the meaning of the commandment of *challah* for women? What purpose is to be served by the commandment? How might the attitude of each of these post-biblical texts impact how women themselves felt about this directive? What do you think is the relative weight of a societally generated valuation of a task versus one that is individually generated?

4. Read “Prayer for Burning the End Piece of the Challah” by Lynn Gottlieb in *Voices* on page 891.
- What feelings does Gottlieb’s poem convey about the author’s “mothers”? Who do you think these mothers represent?
 - Gottlieb writes that she honors “my mothers,” “the fire,” “the love,” and “the Spirit.” In her understanding, how does the action of burning challah accomplish all of these ends? What is the unique gift of each of these four recipients of Gottlieb’s honor, and how do they work together to create the challah?
5. Read the excerpt from *Dakota Diaspora: Memoirs of a Jewish Homesteader* by Sophie Trupin in *Voices* on page 891.
- Trupin writes that her mother “would take a small piece of dough and throw it into the flame of the kitchen range, reciting a special prayer. It was some relic. . . .” In Trupin’s memoir, what is the connection between “some relic” and the rest of her remembrance? Which part is most powerful and meaningful to her? Why is this?
 - If you have baked challah, how do the experiences in this piece and the Gottlieb poem compare to your own experiences? What significance does this activity have for you?
6. Read “Fringes in My Heart” by Nancy Abraham in *Voices* on page 892.
- In Abraham’s poem, where are the fringes?
 - Who is “You,” and where, according to Abraham, is “You” located?
 - How have or do you ever wear fringes (a tallit)? How does imagining Abraham’s fringes being “worn” on the inside rather than outside change or affect your own ideas about wearing them?
 - Why do you think that Abraham selects the heart as the location for her fringes? What other parts of the body might she have chosen? How would your understanding of the poem change had she selected a different place?
 - We generally think of water as formless. In this poem, how does water “pull”?
 - “Surety of freedom” and “blessed binding” would seem, at first glance, to be in opposition to one another. How does Abraham imagine the relationship of each to the other?
7. Personal Reflection and Perspective on Numbers 15:17–21:
- Why do you think that both commandments—to wear fringes and to remove dough—involve an action that takes place at the margins, at a corner, at a point of intersection? What does the idea or image of “corner” evoke for you? What is the relationship between the “corner” and the main body of a place? What is the difference between being located in the former as opposed to the latter? Is hierarchy or status involved? Is one place more meaningful or important than the other? If so, how or why?
 - What are your associations and memories about tallitot? What does the image of the fringes of a tallit evoke for you? Have you ever worn a tallit? Why or why not? If you have, what has that experience been like for you? What was it like the first time you put one on?

Overarching Question

As you study these parts of the *parashah*, keep in mind the following overarching question. If time permits, conclude the class with these broader question:

1. Are optimists and pessimists “born,” or are they “made”? What are the likely contributing factors? Have you ever been in a situation where you and another person interpreted the same situation differently? What accounted for the difference? Were either of you able to change the perception of the other? If so, what proved to be most persuasive?
2. Every culture develops its own specific rituals and rites. What are some of those rituals and rites with which you are familiar from other cultures? What are some of Judaism’s rituals and rites? What are the “gifts”—the benefits or advantages—of performing such ceremonies or acts? How do they help? How do they hinder? Are there rites or rituals that structure your life? If so, why do you perform them, and how does doing so affect you?

Closing Questions

1. What new insight into the Torah did you gain from today’s study?
2. What other new insights did you gain from this study?
3. What questions remain?



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