

TIMELESS TORAH

SHELACH LECHA : CHOOSING FAITH WHEN THE PATH IS UNCLEAR

Ascending With Confidence

‘If the path before you is clear, you’re probably on someone else’s’. Attributed to the late American writer and literary scholar, Joseph Campbell, this quote highlights the fact that one of the most difficult things in life is to identify a sense of clarity about the journey ahead.

Two statements in Parshat Shelach Lecha stand out for their similarity to each other yet lead to radically different consequences. Kalev, standing in opposition to the Spies, attempts to reassure the people that conquering Eretz Canaan is an achievable goal: ‘*Aloh naaleh v’yarashnu otah* – We will surely ascend and conquer it!’ (13:30). The confidence and conviction of this statement, although it had little immediate effect on the people, won Kalev eternal reward. He was promised the land of Chevron as an inheritance and the verse awards him the rare accolade of ‘*avdi* – my servant’ (14:24). By contrast, an almost identical phrase — ‘*hinenu v’alinu* – behold, we will ascend’ (14:40) — is used by another group of people with devastating consequences. This group was the *Maapilim*, certain individuals who, regretting having accepted the bad report of the Spies, arose the next morning and decided to travel straight to Eretz Canaan despite the Divine warning not to do so. The end of this group was swift; the Amalekites and Canaanites fell upon them in battle and the *Maapilim* tragically perished.

The word *maapilim* is not a common word, and Rashi offers two interpretations. Citing other related words in Tanach, he translates it as ‘those of insolent force’, while the Midrash Tanchuma links it to a similar word meaning darkness. Adding some depth to

these nuances, Rabbi Yaakov Kaminetzky (d.1987), in his *Emet L’Yaakov*, links this word to a verse in Yeshayah (32:14), which he understands to refer to underground fortresses. According to all these suggestions, the insinuation is clearly that the *Maapilim* were acting on their volition, without clarity or direction. While their words mirrored the sincerity of Kalev’s, their actions did not display the calm confidence of faith, but rather brazen assurance born of panic.

Divine Success

Looking at the episode in this way, it can easily be understood why the *Maapilim* were doomed to failure. As Moshe warned them, if ‘Hashem is not with you’ (14:42), there is no chance of success. By contrast, when Kalev spoke to the people, his focus was on heeding the word of Hashem. ‘Even if we will have to build ladders and ascend to the Heavens in order to conquer Eretz Canaan’ (see Rashi 13:30), Kalev asserted, we will be successful, for Hashem is in our midst. The *Maapilim*, however, ignoring what had been decreed, could not expect to achieve their goals. The Baal HaTurim (d.1340) emphasises this lesson in his unique style. The *Maapilim*’s cry of ‘*v’alinu* – we will ascend’ is repeated only one other time in Tanach. When Yehonatan, the son of Shaul, decided to make a surprise attack on the Philistines (Shmuel I, 14), he left the encampment of the Jewish army and, accompanied only by his armour bearer, opened a front on the rear ranks of the Philistines. In this episode, Yehonatan used the same phrase as the *Maapilim* — ‘we will ascend’ — but, crucially added that ‘for the salvation of Hashem is not limited’. As much as ignoring Hashem’s will can only lead to abject failure, where there is a promise from Hashem, there can and should be rock-solid confidence that the promise will be fulfilled.



Contemporary Perspectives on the Weekly Parsha
with Rabbi Dr Yoni Birnbaum

Wednesdays - 8.00-8.45pm | In-person at Kinloss

THIS WEEK'S TIMELESS TORAH IS SPONSORED BY JONATHAN ARKUSH AND DEBORAH MYER
IN MEMORY OF THEIR MOTHER, SHIRLEY ARKUSH Z'L

The Strength of the Servant

Witnessing the troubling report of the rest of the Spies, Kalev stood in front of the people, hoping to persuade them to continue to Eretz Canaan. Indeed, '*vayahas Kalev*' (13:30), Kalev succeeded in silencing them. Although the people were distressed at what they had just been told, they had not yet fallen into panic. This was a major moment balanced on a knife edge, where the people were still able to think clearly, and Kalev grabbed it. Indeed, the people were silent and heard him out, but Kalev's efforts were unfortunately not successful. Shortly afterwards, the people broke out in uncontrollable cries.

This was a debate for the hearts and minds of the people. The Spies were sowing alarm and defeatism while Kalev and Yehoshua were preaching faith. What, indeed, was the secret behind Kalev and Yehoshua's strength? What gave them the perspective to see the potential of the future when the others saw only bleakness?

The verse itself alludes to the answer to these questions. When Kalev is singled out for reward (14:24), the verse gives two descriptions of Kalev's character traits that led to him being able to withstand the pressures of the Spies. Firstly, Kalev is described as having a '*ruach acheret imo vayemalei acharai* – another spirit within him, and he followed me'. Simply understood, this means that Kalev did not follow the rest of the Spies; he had a different approach to them. Rashi, however, as explained by the Maharal of Prague (d.1609), understands that the term *ruach* means an internal attitude. Kalev's 'alternative spirit' meant that although he acted and spoke as if in agreement with the rest of the Spies, his internal conviction remained strong and

consistent. As the Ohr HaChaim (d.1743) puts it, there were two paths open before Kalev. He could have been swayed by the influence of his colleagues, but he remained strong and chose the path of 'following Hashem'.

In this choice that Kalev made, he demonstrated the second characteristic mentioned in the verse: '*avdi Kalev* – My servant, Kalev'. Here, Kalev is given the honour of being called a servant of Hashem, a title that, aside for Kalev, the Torah awards only to Moshe Rabbeinu himself. The following anecdote illustrates the power of being referred to as a 'servant'. The eighteenth-century monarch, Frederick the Great of Prussia, was once inspecting his soldiers on parade, and noticed that one of the soldiers had a highly polished watch-chain attached to his tunic. Being in a playful mood, and knowing that this soldier could not have been able to afford a watch, he pulled out his own diamond-studded watch and said, 'My watch says it's half-past one — what does your watch say?' The soldier saluted and pulled at his chain, revealing at the end of it not a watch but a bullet. He replied, 'Sir, my watch has no hours or minutes, but it reminds me every moment of the day that I would be willing to take a bullet for Your Majesty'.

Kalev's strength came in his commitment to the will of Hashem even when the path remained unclear. He gained the title of 'servant of Hashem' because he knew that however uncertain circumstances might be, his task was to utilise the lens of his heritage and faith to face the challenges of the journey ahead.

KORACH: Power, Prestige and the Pursuit of Honour