

June 8, 2013 – Commentary on Shelach, Numbers 13-16

Rabbi Sacks (again) in a commentary called “The Fear of Freedom” asks “how could they (the spies) have gotten it so wrong? . . . They were terrified of the inhabitants of the land and entirely failed to realize that the inhabitants were terrified of them. The truth was the exact opposite of the spies’ report.” Sacks cites Maimonides who “gives us what is probably the first explanation that comes to mind: the Israelites were heirs to generations of slaves and had only begun to taste freedom . . . no wonder they are guilty of failure of nerve or faith (as they have in a series of failures in previous parashot) .”

But, as always with the Jews, there is another opinion, emerging, as Sacks tells us from the Hasidic literature via, among others, the Baal Shem Tov and the Lubavitcher Rabbi to whom “the spies were well-intentioned . . . they were princes, chieftains, leaders . . . they did not fear failure, they feared success. Their concern was spiritual . . . They did not want to leave the wilderness and become just another nation among the nations of the earth . . . (in the wilderness) they were close to God who was a palpable presence in their midst . . .” Sacks acknowledges that this is not the “plain sense” of the narrative but “a psychoanalytical reading or an account of the unconscious mindset of the spies. Ultimately the spies feared freedom and its responsibilities . . . they did not want to contaminate Judaism by dragging it into contact with the real world..”

This interpretation of the spies triggered two memories in my mind. The first is set in a college history class (in the ‘40’s, pre-Israel) in which two young committed Zionists argue with the professor after class that for Jews to have a state of their own, complete with armies and diplomatic representation, “they” – other nations – wouldn’t dare attack us “if we were like everyone else.” The professor suggested that this was naïve but I don’t think the students were convinced.

The second memory comes from a decade or so later when I am in Israel (how I got there is another story) and am at the Hadassah health center where I worked. The staff is at the lunch table and the head nurse is asserting that in Israel “all we want is to be a state like everyone else..” I ask myself “Why? What is so wonderful

about being like everyone else?" I equated the desire to be "like everyone else" with the acceptance of the world as it is and the desire to be in it. It follows that withdrawal from it and into spirituality are undesirable conditions, all right for Christians but not for us Jews since being "different" is the cause of our troubles.

Rabbi Sacks considered both involvement with the world on the one hand and retreat from the world with its responsibilities on the other and opts for the former. He asserts that Judaism is not "a religion of monastic retreat . . . It is a religion of engagement with the world."

But are these two points of view either/or propositions? Isn't it possible to be in the world, involved in its workings every day and then detach oneself for contemplation of the meaning of events and one's own life in the other? Isn't that why we are commanded to rest on Shabbat? I've said in other commentaries that I have great difficulty in understanding the key concepts of religion and spirituality is one of them. If it doesn't mean detaching oneself temporarily from the material world and contemplating life, perhaps there is a better definition somewhere. In any case, it's not for taking a nap or going to the movies.