

Message from the Haftara

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When Status Obscures Mission

SH'LACH

The obvious link between Parshat Sh'lach, in which Moshe sends men to scout out the Land, and its haftara, the story from the book of Yehoshua (ch. 2) of the spies sent to Yericho, is the shared theme of emissaries. But a closer look at the differences between these two missions reveals something far more significant than a surface parallel. Read together, these two stories expose the core moral failure of the desert generation, and the corrective embodied by those who came next.

A close reading of Parshat Sh'lach reveals that the twelve men dispatched by Moshe were never actually called *meraglim* (spies). Rather, they were charged to **LATUR ET HA'ARETZ**, to travel through the land. This was not a covert military intelligence operation; if it were, Moshe would not have sent prominent leaders from each tribe, a delegation large enough to attract attention wherever they went. Their mission was diplomatic in nature: to encounter the land, absorb its

character, and return as ambassadors, each man helping his own tribe envision what awaited them there. It was, in essence, an exercise in public vision-building, an attempt to unify a newly-freed, multitribal people around a shared destiny.

What went wrong was not tactical, but moral. These were not ordinary men; they were men of influence: tribal princes, public figures. Instead of elevating what they saw into a compelling national vision, they allowed their own personal anxieties and insecurities to shape the public narrative, fanning the people's fears and agitating against the very mission they had been entrusted to advance.

Now consider the spies in the haftara. Two men, unnamed, are sent by Yehoshua to scout Yericho. Their mission is explicitly strategic: to gather the tactical intelligence needed to capture the land. There is no ceremony, no tribal representation, no public mandate. They go quietly, operate discreetly, and return with actionable information. Their mission succeeds, in part because they themselves recede, without names, titles, or personal stakes in the outcome. And precisely because the story is not about them but about the people, they are free to rise above personal challenge and serve the objective.

This contrast in how the missions were undertaken is sharpened by a less obvious connection between Parshat Sh'lach and the haftara, one that runs through the figure of the M'KOSHEISH EITZIM, the wood gatherer who violates Shabbat and is put to death at the end of the parsha. Like the spies of Yericho, he remains unnamed. The Talmud (Shabbat 96b) records a striking debate on this point: Rabbi Akiva identifies him as Tz'lofchad, known to us from the later narrative of his daughters, who pressed for their inheritance rights. Rabbi Yehuda ben B'teira rebukes Rabbi Akiva sharply: if the Torah chose to conceal this man's identity, then revealing it undermines that choice. The story is not about the individual, but about the principle: the sanctity of Shabbat, and the boundaries it establishes, which empower our relationship with God.

Once a name enters the story, the focus shifts. Biography, personality, motives and weaknesses eclipse the idea itself.

This is precisely the dynamic that separates failure from success in the two narratives - the emissaries in the parsha and the spies in the haftara. When identity, status, or personal objectives take center stage, even a divinely inspired mission can fail. The 12 leaders in the parsha, defined by their prominence, cannot disentangle themselves from their own anxiety-

driven viewpoints. But the unnamed spies of Yericho carry no such baggage. They can disappear into the mission itself, without any self-interest, advancing the conquest of the land so that the Jewish people can live in their sacred space.

Together, these figures pose an important question about how we serve and live purposeful lives. In fact, commentators suggest (Targum Yonatan Bamidbar 15:32, Tosafot Bava Batra 119b, s.v. AFILU K'TANA) that the anonymous Shabbat-violating wood-collector acted with the intent of showing that even after the punishment of not entering the Land, the commandment of Shabbat remained binding.

Do we view ourselves as vehicles for something larger? Or do we allow our personal identities, anxieties, needs, and ambitions to shape or cloud the mission before us? In our everyday lives - and especially on a national level - these are important questions to ask. The haftara's answer insists that genuine service requires a form of self-effacement: not the erasure of the self, but the willingness to let the values speak more loudly than the name. When the mission matters more than the personality, when the vision speaks louder than the title, that is when a person can act with true clarity, courage and impact. 