



Believing in Ourselves, Owning our Inheritance

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In Parashat Shelah¹, twelve scouts scope out the promised land. They are on a mission to gain answers to specific questions, some about the land itself, and what kind of home it would be, and others about strategy for conquering the land. Fundamentally, it is a story of receiving an ancestral inheritance and doing the work to figure out what it will take to make it home.

This story of home-making has implications for our broader religious lives as well. After all, the Torah is called an inheritance,¹ and we might ask ourselves the same questions the scouts confronted. What would it mean to feel “at home” in Torah, and what will it take to get there? Indeed, in some respects, Torah over the centuries ends up being a kind of home for *Benei Yisrael*, maybe even more than physical land.

When the scouts arrive in the land, we have no idea how they felt at their first encounter with this inheritance. Four verses offer an entirely neutral description of what they did and observed (Bemidbar 13:21-24). But when they speak to the people in retrospect, they share

¹ Devarim 33:4: תֹּרָה צִוְּה־לָנוּ מֹשֶׁה מֹרֶשָׁה קְהִלַּת יִשְׂרָאֵל.



how they were impressed and how they were scared—neither of which convey a sense of home. They describe how the land is meant for giants and not for them; their foray into this so-called inheritance made them feel small, like mere grasshoppers. Home, on the other hand, is about being surrounded by what you know is meant for you—feeling neither “impressed” by the surroundings, nor “scared,” but primarily feeling a sense of familiarity and belonging.

In this story, for these people, fear never resolves into belonging. The people never arrive at a sense of home in the land God promised. But the Rabbis see another mode for feeling “at home” with God, related to the *mitzvah* of *tzitzit*. The *mitzvah* of *tzitzit* comes at the end of the *parashah*—and may serve as a kind of conclusion to the story of the spies. Many of the *mitzvot* that come at the end of the *parashah* are prefaced with the phrase “when you enter the land,” which may feel particularly harsh to this generation who will never enter. However, the *mitzvah* of *tzitzit* does not have that preface. It is relevant everywhere and at all times. A *midrash* describes *tzitzit* as feeling “surrounded” by—at home in—God’s love:

ספרי דברים לו

חביבין ישראל שסיבבן הכל' במצוות. תפילין בראשיהן, ותפילין בזרועותיהן, מזוזה לפיתחיהן, ארבע כנפות טלית.

Sifre Devarim 36

Israel is beloved, for God [in the Torah] surrounded them with *mitzvot*. *Tefillin* on their heads, *tefillin* on their arms, *mezuzah* at their doorways, four corners of the *tallit*...

In this vision of *mitzvot*, they are not primarily about achieving specific outcomes. They have a more subconscious and affective quality. The phrase, “surrounded them with *mitzvot*,” is reminiscent of the image of a groom throwing a cloak over his bride, surrounding her with love and shelter (Yehezkel 16:8). *Mitzvot* create an atmosphere all around us that reminds us of our relationship with God, like being in the atmosphere of a physical home, when one is



surrounded by a sense of love and belonging. Torah and *mitzvot* become our shelter and inheritance.

The relationship of the *mitzvah* of *tzitzit* to the broader story is not just one of proximity. *Tzitzit* seem to serve as a *tikkun*, antidote, to the behavior of the scouts. The Torah explains that *tzitzit* are meant to ensure we don't "go astray" (ולא תתורו), a clear allusion to the verb used to describe the scouts' journey (לתור).² And while the adjuration against going astray is often understood as prohibiting lust for what one sees or desires (going after "your heart and your eyes"),³ it is worth observing that the failure of the scouts does not seem to be a problem of lust. The problem was that they felt too small; they didn't let themselves feel at home and have a sense of ownership over the promised inheritance. In their minds, the land was not for them; it was for "giants," not "grasshoppers."⁴

The meaning of the thread of *tekhelet* in *tzitzit* may be interpreted in this vein as a response to the scouts' sense of insecurity and inadequacy. Threads of *tekhelet* indicate something special, something that is holy to God. *Tekhelet* adorns the head of the high priest as part of the *tzitz* headpiece, inscribed with the words "holy for God." We know that *tekhelet* was a symbol of royalty in the ancient world. A thread of *tekhelet* on everyone's garments in *tzitzit*, then, conveys the message that a relationship with God isn't only for the *kohen gadol*—it is for everyone. God's inheritance is not for someone bigger or greater than me; it is meant for me.

The scouts were too scared to actualize a desire to take ownership of a promised inheritance, but we can embody the *mitzvah* of *tzitzit*, and God surrounding us with *mitzvot* more generally, to feel "at home" in our religious inheritance of Torah. With *tzitzit* as a constant reminder that we belong, we can have the courage to enter and dwell in our inheritance of

² Bemidbar 13:16, 21, 25.

³ Rashi on Bemidbar 15:39: לא תתורו אחרי לבבכם - כמו (לעיל יג כה) מתור הארץ. הלב והעינים הם מרגלים לגוף ומסרסים לו את העבירות, העין רואה והלב חומד והגוף עושה את העבירות.

⁴ Bemidbar 13:33.



Torah. Like God's promise to Israel that they will come to own each part of the promised land they tread with their own feet,⁵ we can explore our inheritance of Torah, making each piece of Torah ours the more we become familiar with it.

It is not always so simple to feel at home in Torah, though. The *midrash* goes on to relate how David felt disoriented in his relationship with God when he was naked in the bath house, without any of the *mitzvah*-adornments described in the first part of the *midrash*.⁶ He worries he may not be in relationship with God. David is ultimately reassured when he sees the mark of his circumcision (מילה); this reminds him that he and his body **are** in fact at home in relationship with God. But as a reader, the source of his reassurance brings into clear relief how so many of the *mitzvot* described as a constant indication of God's love for Israel have not actually applied to all of Israel. In the history of tradition, where *tefillin* and *tzitzit*, and certainly *milah*, have just been for males, many of us can come away from this midrash feeling on the margins of divine love, not quite at home in *mitzvot* and our relationship with God. What do we do when, like the scouts, we feel that this inheritance of ours does not seem like it is meant for us?

The story of the scouts must sink in deeply for us to overcome this feeling. When we encounter something in Torah that triggers a feeling that the Torah is meant for others, not me, or maybe it is full of lurking enemies, that is our moment to be like Yeshoshua and Kalev. We will inherit this Torah because "it is very good,"⁷ and in our desire to make it our home we will help it live up to the potential it has. As we "walk the land" of our inheritance of Torah, the

⁵ Devarim 11:24.

⁶ Sifre Devarim 36 cont.

...נכנס למרחץ ראה עצמו ערום. אמר: אוי לי שאני ערום מן המצות! נסתכל במילה התחיל סודר עליה את השבח...

David entered the bathhouse and saw himself naked. He said, "Woe is me that I am stripped of *mitzvot*!" He saw his circumcision and began to recite praises for it...

⁷ Bemidbar 14:7: וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל-כָּל-עַדְת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר עָבְרָנוּ בָּהּ לְתוֹר אֱתָהּ טוֹבָה הָאָרֶץ מְאֹד מְאֹד.



familiarity we build and depth of connection we forge can fuel our sense of belonging and ownership. May we feel fortified in our efforts to conquer our fears and leap into a life of learning and ownership that bears beautiful fruit.

