

# General George McClellan and the Sin of the Spies

Parashat Sh'lach, Numbers, Chapters 13-15 | June 23, 2022

In 1862, Robert E. Lee took his army into Maryland—the first time that it entered Union territory. Encountering this threat to Union forces, Lincoln turned to a man who he had already essentially fired, and then brought back: General George McClellan. Suddenly, it seemed that fortune favored McClellan, for a soldier from Indiana soon came upon three cigars wrapped in a paper. What he had discovered was Special Order No. 191, which is referred to today as “Lee’s Lost Order,” allowing McClellan to know exactly what Lee was planning. History.com succinctly summarizes the discovery:

...the 27<sup>th</sup> Indiana rested in a meadow outside of Frederick, Maryland, which had served as the site of a Confederate camp a few days before. Sergeant John Bloss and Corporal Barton W. Mitchell found a piece of paper wrapped around three cigars. The paper was addressed to Confederate General D.H. Hill. Its title read, “Special Order No. 191, Headquarters, Army of Northern Virginia.” Realizing that they had discovered a copy of the Confederate operation plan, Bloss and Mitchell quickly passed it up the chain of command. By chance, the division adjutant general, Samuel Pittman, recognized the handwriting on the orders as that of a colleague from the prewar army, Robert Chilton, who was the adjutant general to Robert E. Lee.

Pittman took the order to McClellan. The Union commander had spent the previous week mystified by Lee’s operations, but now the Confederate plan was clear. He reportedly gloated, “Here is a paper with which if I cannot whip Bobbie Lee, I will be willing to go

home.” McClellan now knew that Lee’s forces were split into five parts and scattered over a 30-mile stretch, with the Potomac River in between. At least eight miles separated each piece of Lee’s army, and McClellan was just a dozen miles from the nearest Confederate unit at South Mountain. Bruce Catton, the noted Civil War historian, observed that no general in the war “was ever given so fair a chance to destroy the opposing army one piece at a time.”

The Union and Confederate forces met in what was known as Antietam, or Sharpsburg. The result, though technically a Union victory, was not the triumph it ought to have been. This tells us a great deal about how fear and anxiety can hamper a general, and it also lies at the heart of one of the most disastrous moments in the story of biblical Israel.

The story of the spies begins in Numbers, chapter 13:

*And the Lord spoke unto Moses, saying,*

*Send thou men, that they may examine the land of Canaan...from every tribe of their fathers shall ye send a man, every one a prince among them. (Numbers 13:1-2)*

Moses thus sent 12 men from 12 tribes to explore the land. The men return, and deliver their report:

*And they told him, and said, We came onto the land wither thou sent us, and surely it floweth with milk and honey; and this is the fruit of it.*

*However, the people that dwell on the land are fierce, and the cities are fortified, and very great: and moreover, we saw the children of Anak there.*

*Amalek dwelleth in the land of the south, and the Hittites, and the Jebusites, and the Amorites, dwell in the mountains, and the Canaanites dwelleth by the sea, and along by the side of the Jordan. (Numbers 13:27-29)*

We are further informed:

*And they spread an evil report of the land which they had spied out onto the children of Israel, saying, The land through which we have passed to spy it out, is a land that eateth up the inhabitants thereof; and all the people that we saw in it are men of great stature. (Numbers 13:32)*

Israel, hearing this report, cries out in dismay. But two of the spies, Joshua and Caleb, deliberately exclude themselves from these nattering nabobs of negativism. They eschew profound pessimism and encourage Israel to embrace optimism, hope, and faith. They say:

*If the Lord delight in us, then he will bring us into this land, and give it unto us; a land flowing with milk and honey.*

*Only rebel not against the Lord, neither fear ye the people of the land... (Numbers 14:8-9)*

But it is too late. Israel bemoans its fate, writes off the forthcoming battles as unwinnable, and God sentences the entire generation to wander the desert for 40 years to die there, with only their children entering the land:

*Surely ye shall not come into the land, concerning which I lifted up my hand that I would make you dwell therein, save Caleb the son of Jephunneh and Joshua the son of Nun. (Numbers 14:30)*

Here, fear—fear of the forthcoming battle—is the ultimate sin; the fear of the spies, and the fear fostered by the spies among the people. Those who are not punished embody the opposite. Joshua defeats fear. Caleb is all confidence, telling Israel:

*Let us go up at once, and possess it; for we are well able to overcome it. (Numbers 13:30)*

In the end, giving into fear makes or breaks leaders and makes or breaks those they lead. This was true

then and remains true now. It was true of the leaders of the tribes that were the spies of the Bible. And it is also true in American history, including at Antietam. As Ronald Roberts of West Point writes of George McClellan:

When gifted with the perfect piece of intelligence with which to destroy Lee, he did nothing for eighteen crucial hours. Moving slowly, as was his habit, he allowed the dangerously exposed garrison at Harpers Ferry to be sacrificed and permitted Lee to concentrate his forces on the ground of his choosing at Sharpsburg.

Every man has fear; the question is whether one can control it. And because of McClellan's own lack of confidence, he was unable to fully use the fact that he knew exactly what Lee was planning. In summarizing McClellan's flaws, Roberts cites T. Harry Williams' book *Lincoln and His Generals*. Williams writes:

He was a fine organizer and trainer of troops; and his men, sensing that he identified with them, idolized him. In preparing for battle he was confident and energetic, but as he approached the field of operations he became slow and timid. He magnified every obstacle; in particular, the size of the enemy army increased in his mind the closer he got to it. In battle he tended to interpret sights and sounds in his front as unfavorable to him; he hesitated to throw in his whole force at the supreme moment; and he withdrew when bolder men would have attacked.

Many of these phrases perfectly describe as well exactly how the spies reacted to what they saw in the Holy Land: they magnified every obstacle, and the size of the enemy army increased the closer they got to it. McClellan let his own lack of confidence, his own inner fear, dominate, and so did the spies. Perhaps the best line about McClellan was said by a soldier on the other side of Sharpsburg. An aide to Robert E. Lee said,

There was a single item in our advantage, but it was an important one.

McClellan had brought superior forces to Sharpsburg, but he had also brought himself.

McClellan had brought to the fore of his leadership his every anxiety, and it hindered him as well as the forces he led.

Many think that the war could have ended at Antietam 1862, but in the end, it dragged on for years. Israel could have entered the land at this very moment, but when the spies brought back a report of the goodness of the land, of its extraordinary agriculture, they also “brought themselves.” They brought every negative aspect of themselves to the fore.

The sinful spies were all leaders in their age; we are told in Numbers that all of them were men who were heads of the children of Israel. But just as the head is the source of the stimuli for the body, the fear that they felt traveled through the people of Israel. Conversely, when leaders are courageous, their own courage can ignite the souls of others.

And if McClellan brought not only superior armies, but also his own anxieties to his failure at Antietam, there were fortunately other examples of leaders who inspired courage in the Union forces. Perhaps one of the greatest moments in the Civil War took place when the Union repelled Lee’s other incursion into the North in 1863 at Gettysburg. For some historians, the entire battle ultimately turned on one small area, a high ground known as Little Round Top, which was defended by the 20<sup>th</sup> Maine, led by Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain. Out of ammunition, desperate to hold this high ground, Chamberlain ordered his forces to take out their bayonets and to charge straight at the guns of the forces below them.

The memoir of a man who fought for Chamberlain, Theodore Gerrish, described the scene.

Colonel Chamberlain understands how it can be done. The order is given ‘Fix Bayonets!’ and the steel shanks of the bayonets rattle upon the rifle barrels. ‘Charge bayonets, charge!’ Every man understood in a moment that the movement was our only salvation, but

there is a limit to human endurance. And I do not dishonor those brave men when I write that for a brief moment, the order was not obeyed, and the little line seemed to quail under the fearful fire that was being poured upon it.

But then, Gerrish adds, one man, Lieutenant H.S. Melcher, stepped forward.

[W]ith a cheer and a flash of his sword, full ten paces to the front he sprang—ten paces—more than half the distance between hostile lines. ‘Come on! Come on! Come on, boys!’ he shouts. The color sergeant and the brave color guard follow, and with one wild yell of anguish wrung from its tortured heart, the regiment charged. The Rebels were confounded at the movement. We struck them with fearful shock. They recoil, stagger, break and run, and like avenging demons our men pursue.

The Confederates were routed and captured. This moment may well have saved the Battle of Gettysburg and perhaps the whole war, which is why these words that Gerrish wrote of his regiment are still cited today.

Stand firm, ye boys from Maine, for not once in a century are men permitted to bear such responsibilities for freedom and justice, for God and humanity, as are now placed upon you.

It was Franklin Roosevelt who famously said that “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself,” but the Bible put it a bit differently, giving us verses such as, “*The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord...*” and “*though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me...*” It is the fear of God, the awareness of the presence of God, faith in God, that is the solution to fear. It is that biblical call to courage that for readers of the Bible echoes throughout the ages.

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*Discussion Questions:*

1. The Torah reading highlights how leaders must inspire faith and courage in those they lead. Who are some biblical leaders who succeeded in doing this? Why do you think they were able to inspire courage while the spies could only inspire fear?
2. The line between courage and recklessness is not always clear. How should we as Jews—inspired to bravery by our faith in God—discern the difference?

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