

Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah - Shelakh

"O wad some Power the gift he give us, to see ourselves as others see us!" Robert Burns

The poet was speaking about a woman in church wearing a gorgeous bonnet when a single louse (singular for lice) crawled from her and walked freely around the stylish bonnet. Did she know? How could she have known? What was she thinking of how she looked, and how were people seeing her? Certainly the ability to see ourselves in each other's eyes would be eye opening for us all. Some of us might be horribly embarrassed, while others might have the type of experience that makes for movies such as "It's a Wonderful Life" with the late Jimmy Stewart. What we know for sure is that even while we look at ourselves in the mirror every day, we stare at a very different person than most of the world claims to see and know. Still and all, even while there is no one more intimate with ourselves than ourselves, we claim to know ourselves best, but ... we don't.

The real problem is that if we cannot even see ourselves clearly, what makes us think we can fully understand the world around us? Face it ... we are all guilty of projecting our thoughts on to other people. We see them, and judge them based on what we think we know about them, however little that may be. We spend a lot of energy imposing our judgment on others, based solely on the snippets of their lives that we get to see. Usually, we speak of this phenomenon in the context of tabloids, but it is true of many more situations wherein we engage large issues in the world armed only with ignorance. This ignorance is the root and cause of fear; and this fear is the foundation of all bigotry and prejudice. The result of this real problem is that we default to this bigotry and fail to engage in ways that help each other grow. We talk about people, but not with them.

During the course of this week's Torah Portion, Moses gathers the heads of the tribes and sends them on a quest to spy out the land of Canaan, the land to become Israel. He entrusts them with a charge from God to look at the land to see how it will be best to enter and to find out what the people should expect upon getting there. There is no point in the conversation that makes the move into the land conditional. As the Torah states, the people of Israel were headed to the land promised to them by God; and God knows no obstacles. But there was an obstacle. The obstacle was the people themselves. Rather than see the large fruit and flowing fields of grain as signs of blessings, they decided that these must be the fields of horrific giants who would destroy the people if they tried to enter the land. With only pieces of the story and the additions of their own ignorance and fear, they came back and convinced the millions waiting on them that it was too dangerous, and despite what Moses promised on God's behalf, moving into the land was suicide. While this decision had no relevance to the truth, it won the day. As a result, these people only did not inherit the land then, but wandered for forty years and never saw it. When we did get to return to the land, we had fought years of wars through the wilderness and then had to struggle with the people already there in a way not part of the original plan. The failure of the spies' perceptions cost all of Israel dearly.

I cannot help but see in this episode the metaphor for so much of what I see is wrong in this world. Ignorance and prejudice do cause irreparable damage, and the damage affects not only those who have tainted viewpoints, but the rest of us, as well. Where we let those who speak their prejudices control

our decisions, we condemn the whole world. We know this to be true in the realm of politics, religion, and all matters where propaganda influences how we think about the many “others” amongst us in this world. Martin King taught us that a segregated world can never meet in God. The Torah tells us to love our neighbors as though they were us. There has not been a great leader who has helped the world move forward who has not maintained that peace is about all of us, not some of us. Through it all, people condemn the spies for lacking faith and for leading us astray. People condemn the voices that spread the propaganda. I wonder why, if there are so many people who “understand” this problem, why we let it happen? What responsibilities do we have to help the ignorant to grow or hold accountable those who spread misinformation? It seems that if we know that the problem exists, and we care about justice, compassion, and education, then we ought to get involved to fix the matter. Why did the poet write satire about the woman with the louse on her hat? Did he tell her it was there to help shield her from humiliation, or did he stand by and privately or publicly mock her? When people say things or do things, and we say nothing in response, they have a right to believe that we agree with them. In either event we need to speak up. Shabbat Shalom!