



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Shlach 5771

By Shira Fischer

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For many of us, the situation in Sudan feels hopeless. In Sudan's western region of Darfur, a genocide has continued for eight years, claiming the lives of more than 450,000 people and displacing millions of others. Meanwhile, decades of civil war between the North and South had finally ended in 2005, only to suffer repeated flare-ups like the latest clashes in Abyei,¹ which threaten this fragile peace.

So many people have died already in this conflict that sometimes it is hard not to feel like our efforts to pursue peace are futile. Lately, when I receive e-mails urging me to take action about Sudan, I often give in to my feelings of hopelessness and do nothing at all.

This feeling of paralysis, of being overwhelmed by the hugeness of a problem to the point of inability to act, may have been the experience of the spies sent out by Moses in *Parshat Shlach*. Venturing into the 'Land of Milk and Honey,' they thought it would be easy to move in and settle, but instead, they confronted "a land that consumes its inhabitants,"² where they were so overwhelmed by the challenges that they advocated giving up. Their fear was contagious, and the whole Israelite nation took up their defeatist posture, saying, "Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt!"³

There were, however, two among the spies who refused to give in to this destructive fear: Caleb and Joshua. In the face of the cries of their ten compatriots convincing the people that entering the land would lead to the loss of their wives and children,⁴ these two stood up and took a minority position. "*Alo na'aleh*," they said; "We can surely go up and take possession of it, for we can indeed overcome it."⁵

The text isn't clear what led Joshua and Caleb to be so optimistic (one *midrash* suggests that while in the land of Israel Caleb visited the graves of his forefathers⁶—perhaps gaining strength from a family history of overcoming opposition). But whatever the reason, their confidence that the Children of Israel could overcome this latest adversity in their path should be instructive to contemporary advocates for Darfur.

Like us, they did not succeed at first. Caleb and Joshua's advocacy failed to convince the people that the other spies were wrong, and the mass panic that resulted led to a sentence of 40 years of wandering in the desert. But they never lost sight of their belief that entering the land was possible, and because of this perseverance, their vision did become reality in the end.

¹ Gettleman, Jeffrey, and Josh Kron. "Warnings of all-out War in Fight over Sudan Town," *New York Times*, 22 May 2011. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/23/world/africa/23sudan.html?_r=1&scp=6&sq=abyei&st=cse

² Numbers 13:32.

³ Numbers 14:4.

⁴ Numbers 14:3.

⁵ Numbers 13:30.

⁶ Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 34b.

As the conflict in Darfur enters its ninth year, we must learn from their example, and resist the urge to wallow in despair in the face of an obstacle so huge. We must remember that standing up for what you believe, even if the project seems daunting, can lead to change, even if not immediately.

Thankfully, there are plenty of Calebs and Joshuas in the world today. Even though potentially paralyzing news in Sudan continues, they are able to see the potential for change in a land that others dismiss for ‘consuming its inhabitants.’ Many of the recent victories in the region, like the 2005 peace agreement between the North and South and the generally peaceful referendum on southern independence in January, were the results of minority voices of optimism triumphing over a dominant wind of despair. The ongoing challenges—like the recent flare ups of violence in Abyei—must not prevent us from maintaining this optimism. Now more than ever, Sudan needs advocates who are willing to shout out, “*Alo na’aleh*—we can do it!” against the voices of naysayers who fail to act because they think the situation is hopeless.

We, too, can join this call. We can ask our leaders to take action by sending letters and signing petitions. We can financially support organizations working to end the conflict or supporting those suffering as a result. And we can examine our personal investments to make sure our money is not going to companies funding warfare or countries involved in genocide. AJWS and other advocacy groups are currently calling for the United States to immediately “suspend progress toward normalization of relations with Sudan,” and to adopt a strong, consequence-based policy towards the Sudanese government.⁷ If enough voices echo this call, it may convince the agitators of violence to finally put down their weapons in favor of peace.

The situation in Sudan is not hopeless if we refuse to heed the voices—from others and in ourselves—that want to convince us that it is so. Let us have the strength to stand up to those who would go back to Egypt and say, “Peace is possible—we can do it!”



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⁷ AJWS: Take Action. Sudan Violence Threatens Renewed War. http://ajws.org/get_involved/take_action.html.

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