



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Shlach 5775

By Aviva Presser Aiden

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The Jewish people are approaching the culmination of the Exodus experience—the long-awaited fulfillment of the promise to the Patriarchs that their children would one day inherit the Land of Canaan. They are camped right at the border when the now-ominous words that open *Parashat Shlach* appear—“Send for yourself men to spy out the land of Canaan”—the beginning of the end for this generation.¹

The men sent to Canaan come back with terrifying tidings: The people of the land are mighty and monstrous, they report. Among these inhabitants are the Amalekites, who had already clashed with the Jewish people at Rephidim. All in all, the spies’ report is enough to instill dread and despair in the rest of the Jewish people.²

Kalev ben Yefuneh, representing the tribe of Judah in the scouting expedition, intercedes to reassure the people. He presents a counter-voice which declares that the land is indeed good, everything they had believed it was; and despite the odds against the Israelites, when they enter the land they will be victorious because God will be with them.³ The people, tragically, are not convinced, and God condemns the entire nation to walk the desert, living in the wilderness until the generation dies. No one of the generation that had scorned the Promised Land would live to see it.

Kalev was exempt from the punishment of his generation. He is referred to in this text as *avdi*—My servant – by God. Very few ever merit this accolade. In fact, in the Pentateuch, there are only three—Avraham,⁴ Moshe⁵ and Kalev. So what is unique about these three that they merit this rare form of praise?

God explains Kalev’s exemption from the national punishment as being “because he had a different spirit and remained loyal.” Loyalty is something we would expect of a good servant; but there are many in the Torah who are loyal to God, yet not referred to as *avdi*. So it must be the first part of this description, the ‘different spirit,’ (a character trait not usually associated with servitude) which distinguishes these three individuals. Kalev’s ‘different spirit’ is a stark defiance in the face of unjust majority opinion, as he clings to God’s promise regarding Canaan

¹ Bamidbar 13:2

² Bamidbar 13:25- 14:4

³ Bamidbar 13:30; 14:6-10; Bamidbar 14:22-23. After Kalev silences the clamor of the people, Joshua joins him in urging them to be loyal to God and to believe in both the goodness of the land and in their ability to conquer it. Joshua is the only other member of the generation to enter the land of Canaan.

⁴ E.g. Bereishit 26:24

⁵ E.g. Bamidbar 12:7-8

despite its frightening inhabitants, the pressure imposed by the other spies, and the threat from the panicked community.⁶

A similar boldness is woven into the life stories of Avraham and Moshe as well. In the case of Avraham, the *midrash* illustrates his disregard for popular opinion and his own personal safety when he faces Nimrod's fiery furnace rather than worship Nimrod's gods.⁷ Moshe too, growing up as an Egyptian prince, first shows his mettle when he challenges the abuse of the Jewish slaves at great personal risk.⁸ The accolade of *avdi* thus signifies a unique loyalty to God that involves the courage to speak out and act against injustice in the face of power, opposing popular opinion or danger.

Today, we can find ourselves in circumstances in which speaking out or acting in opposition to injustice can be difficult. Consequences of protesting established authorities or popular opinion can range from merely unpleasant looks and whispers to far more severe consequences including loss of livelihood, loss of social support or even death.

Tragically, this latter extreme turned out to be the case for Bety Trujillo, Executive Director of CACTUS, a former AJWS grantee that supports sustainable community development in indigenous communities in the Mixteca region of Oaxaca, Mexico. Recently, as a result of ongoing paramilitary presence, many of these communities faced shortages of water, food and basic medical supplies. On April 27, 2010, Ms. Trujillo and 30 other human rights activists were attacked by the paramilitary group as they attempted to bring critical supplies to the people. Ms. Trujillo and another member of her convoy were killed.

Fortunately, most of us will never face this level of penalty for our defiance of authority. But speaking out or taking action against wrongdoing by powerful or influential parties—from supervisors at work to spiritual leaders; from unjust governments to corporate entities abusing land or people—is a challenging road, often fraught with risk. Yet in doing so, and in supporting others with the courage to speak out and take action, we too can become *avadim*—servants of God.



Aviva Presser Aiden, a first-year medical student at Harvard Medical School, received her PhD from Harvard's School of Engineering and Applied Sciences in 2009. She co-founded Bears Without Borders, an organization fostering economic opportunities among developing-world artisans, and is co-founder and CTO of Lebônê, a social enterprise developing microbial fuel cells as an off-grid energy and lighting solution for Africa. These initiatives have received significant public acclaim, including a novella inspired by Bears Without Borders and *New York Times* coverage of Lebônê's technology. Aviva can be reached at aviva.ajws@gmail.com.

⁶ Bamidbar 14:9-10

⁷ Bereishit Rabbah 38:13

⁸ Shemot 2:11-12

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45 West 36th Street, New York, NY 10018 • t 212.792.2900 • f 212.792.2930 • e ajws@ajws.org •

www.ajws.org

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AJWS grantees speak out on similar issues today. In September 2014, 43 student teachers were “disappeared” (abducted and likely murdered) from the rural university of Ayotzinapa in Guerrero, Mexico, as they were preparing for a political demonstration in a nearby city. AJWS grantee Tlachinollan organized the community to support the families of the students to petition for justice. Demonstrations spread through the country as Mexicans demanded that the Mexican government investigate the disappearance of the students and stop the violence that has plagued their country with impunity. AJWS grantees across Mexico are speaking out about human rights abuses like these, often at great personal risk. To learn more about their work on these issues, read our [Mexico Country Profile](#).

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