



SHELACH

TO COMMIT, TO QUESTION, OR ... BOTH?

A License to Question Isn't a License to Reject

PARSHAH OVERVIEW

Shelach

Moses sends twelve spies to the land of Canaan. Forty days later they return, carrying a huge cluster of grapes, a pomegranate, and a fig, to report on a lush and bountiful land. But ten of the spies warn that the inhabitants of the land are giants and warriors “more powerful than we”; only Caleb and Joshua insist that the land can be conquered, as G d has commanded.

The people weep that they’d rather return to Egypt. G d decrees that Israel’s entry into the land shall be delayed forty years, during which time that entire generation will die out in the desert. A group of remorseful Jews

storm the mountain on the border of the land, and are routed by the Amalekites and Canaanites. The laws of the *menachot* (meal, wine, and oil offerings) are given, as well as the mitzvah to consecrate a portion of the dough (challah) to G d when making bread. A man violates the Shabbat by gathering sticks, and he is put to death. G d instructs us to place fringes (*tzitzit*) on the four corners of our garments so that we should remember to fulfill the *mitzvot* (Divine commandments).



Knowing that many fearsome warrior tribes resided in the Land, the Jews thought it prudent to send spies to reconnoiter Canaan.

TEXT 1

Deuteronomy 1:22

וַתִּקְרְבוּן אֵלַי כָּלְכֶם וַתֹּאמְרוּ, נִשְׁלַח אַנְשִׁים לְפָנֵינוּ
וַיַּחְפְּרוּ לָנוּ אֶת הָאָרֶץ, וַיָּשֻׁבוּ אֲתָנוּ דָּבָר אֶת הַדֶּרֶךְ
אֲשֶׁר נֵעֲלֶה בָּהּ וְאֵת הָעָרִים אֲשֶׁר נָבֹא אֲלֵיהֶן:

You all approached me and said, “Let’s send men to search out the land and bring back word about which route we should ascend, and which cities we should enter.”

TEXT 2A

Numbers 13:2

שְׁלַח לְךָ אֲנָשִׁים, וַיִּתְּרוּ אֶת אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי נֹתֵן
לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Send out men for yourself to scout the land
of Canaan that I am giving to the Jews.

TEXT 2B

Rashi, ad loc.

“שלח לך”: לדעתך, אני איני מצוה לך, אם תרצה
שלח.

Send for yourself: As you understand. I am
not telling you to send. If you want to send,
send.

TEXT 3A

Numbers 13:20

וַיֹּמַר הָאָרֶץ, הַשְׂמֵנָה הִיא אִם רַזָּה, הֲיֵשׁ בָּהּ עֵץ אִם אֵין,
וְהִתְחַזְּקוּתֶם וּלְקַחְתֶּם מִפְּרֵי הָאָרֶץ:

What is the nature of the soil—is it fat or lean? Are there trees or not? Gird yourselves and take from the fruit of the land.

TEXT 3B

Nachmanides, ad loc.

וטעם "והתחזקתם ולקחתם", שלא יפחדו בלקחם מפרי
הארץ פן יכירו בהם שהם מרגלים.

"Gird yourselves with courage and take fruit."
Don't be afraid that if you take fruit from the
land, you might be exposed as spies.

Obedience is the core
and root of Judaism.
Without firm and loyal
obedience to G-d, we
have nothing.



TEXT 4

*Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib
Alter, Sefat Emet, Shemini
5659*

דעיקר עשיות המצוה בכח הציווי, וזה למעלה
מכל הכוונות.

שהרי נדב ואביהוא, שהיו גדולי עולם והיה להם
כוונות ויחודים וסודות במעשיהם, אף על פי כן,
מצד שלא צוה אותם נענשו.

קל וחומר מזה טובה המרובה, המקיים המצוה
לעשות ציווי הבורא אף על פי שאינו יודע כלום,
חשוב ככל הכוונות.

The primary reason to perform a mitzvah is that G-d commanded it. This is greater than all other intentions.

Nadab and Abihu, some of the greatest Jews of their time, had many lofty intentions. Yet they were punished for doing something that they were not instructed to do.

When applied to the positive, this principle is even more compelling. It tells us that simply performing a mitzvah with no understanding—purely out of obedience to G-d—is loftier than all sacred intentions.

TEXT 5A

Rashi, Genesis 1:1

אף על פי שכל חקי התורה גזרות הם . . . ראוי
להתבונן בהן וכל מה שאמה יכול לתן לו טעם, תן
לו טעם. הרי אמרו חכמים הראשונים שהמלך
שלמה הבין רב הטעמים של כל חקי התורה.

Although all of the Torah's statutes are
suprarational decrees, . . . it is appropriate to
meditate upon them and, wherever possible,
provide a reason. The sages of the early
generations said that King Solomon
understood most of the rationales for all of
the statutes of the Torah.



The Jewish people have a robust history of asking questions. The Talmud is filled with questions. The sages were constantly challenging the status quo, posing questions, raising contradictions, and seeking clarification.

TEXT 5B

Rabbi Shlomo Aviner,
Sefer HaKuzari, Pirush
2:28, p. 219

מסופר (במסכת שבת י, א): רבי ירמיה היה יושב לפני רבי זירא ולומד תורה. הגיע זמן מנחה ורבי ירמיה היה בהול לסיים את לימודו שלא יאחר לתפילה. קרא עליו רבי זירא את הפסוק: "מסיר אוזנו משמע תורה גם תפילתו תועבה" (משלי כח, ט).

אם אינך לומד כראוי, גם תפילתך, תהא מכוונת ככל שתהא, היא תועבה. אמנם אתה מתפלל אל ה' בכל לבבך, אלא אינך יודע כראוי מיהו וכיצד עובדים אותו.

The Talmud (Shabbat 10a) relates that Rabbi Yirmiyah was sitting before Rabbi Zeira and studying Torah. The time for the afternoon prayer service had arrived, and Rabbi Yirmiyah hurried to complete his studies. When Rabbi Zeira saw this, he proclaimed, "One who turns his ear from hearing the Torah, his prayer is also an abomination" (Proverbs 28:9).

If you don't study the Torah appropriately, no matter how mindful you are during prayer, your prayer is abominable. You might pray to G-d with all your heart, but you won't know who G-d is and how to worship Him properly.

“We will listen” is the ultimate form of Judaism because G-d wants us to understand Him and connect with Him through our minds as well.



TEXT 6A

Rabbi Shneur Zalman of
Liadi, *Likutei Amarim*, ch.
38

שְׁזֶהוּ גַם כֵּן רְצוֹנוֹ יִתְבָּרֵךְ, לְדַבֵּקָה בְּשִׁכְלִי
וּמַחְשָׁבָה, וְכוֹנֵנֶת הַמַּצּוֹת מַעֲשִׂיּוֹת, וּבְכוֹנֵנֶת קְרִיאַת
שְׁמַע וְתַפִּלָּה וּשְׁאָר בְּרָכוֹת.

וְהָאֵרַת רְצוֹן הָעֲלִיּוֹן הֵנָּה הַמְּאִירָה וּמְלוּבֶּשֶׁת
בְּכוֹנֶנֶה זֶה הִיא גְּדוּלָּה לְאִין קִץ, לְמַעַלָּה מֵעַלָּה
מִהָאֵרַת רְצוֹן הָעֲלִיּוֹן הַמְּאִירָה וּמְלוּבֶּשֶׁת בְּקִיּוֹם
הַמַּצּוֹת עֲצָמָן בְּמַעֲשֵׂה וּבְדַבּוּר בְּלִי כוֹנֶנֶה.

This too is G-d's will. G-d wants us to bind our minds and thoughts to Him. He wants us to be mindful as we fulfill His commandments, recite the Shema, pray, and chant the blessings.

When we use our minds, the degree of Divinity we channel is immeasurably greater than the Divine will channeled by a mindless fulfillment of His will, utilizing only our actions and/or words.



The crown
jewel is the
heart.

**G-d wants
our hearts.**

TEXT 6B

Isaiah 29:13

כִּי נִגַּשׁ הָעָם הַזֶּה בִּפְּיוֹ, וּבִשְׂפָתָיו כְּבָדוּנִי, וְלִבּוֹ
רָחֵק מִמֶּנִּי. וַתְּהִי יִרְאַתָּם אֵתִי מִצִּנּוֹת אָנָּשִׁים
מִלְמָדָה:

The people approach me with their mouths
and honor me with their lips, but their hearts
are distant from me. They obey me by rote.

TEXT 7

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks's Haggadah: Hebrew and English Text with New Essays and Commentary (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2015), pp. 106–108

There are three conditions, though, for asking a Jewish question.

The first is that we seek genuinely to learn—not to doubt, ridicule, dismiss, reject. That is what the ‘wicked son’ of the Haggadah does: ask not out of a desire to understand but as a prelude to walking away.

Second is that we accept limits to our understanding. Not everything is intelligible at any given moment. There were scientists at the beginning of the twentieth century who believed that virtually every major discovery had already been made—not suspecting that the next hundred years would give rise to Einstein’s relativity theory, Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, Gödel’s theorem, proof of the ‘Big Bang’ origin of the universe, the discovery of DNA and the decoding of the human genome.

In relation to Torah, there were many German and American Jews in the nineteenth century who could not understand Jewish prayers for a return to Zion, and deleted them from the prayer book.

These facts should induce in us a certain humility. Not every scientific orthodoxy survives the test of time. Not everything in Judaism that we do not understand is unintelligible. The very features of Jewish life one generation finds difficult, the next generation may find the most meaningful of all. Faith is not opposed to questions, but it is opposed to the shallow certainty that what we understand is all there is.

Third is that when it comes to Torah, we learn by living and understand by doing. We learn to understand music by listening to music. We learn to appreciate literature by reading literature. There is no way of understanding Shabbat without keeping Shabbat, no way of appreciating how Jewish laws of family purity enhance a marriage without observing them. Judaism, like music, is something that can only be understood from the inside, by immersing yourself in it.

Given these caveats, Judaism is a faith that, more than any other, values the mind, encouraging questions and engaging us at the highest level of intellectual rigor. Every question asked in reverence is the start of a journey towards G-d.

TEXT 8A

Rashi, Genesis 6:6

אפיקורוס אחד שאל את רבי יהושע בן קרחה. אמר לו: "אין אתם מודים שהקדוש ברוך הוא רואה את הנולד?"

אמר לו: "הן".

אמר לו: "והא כתיב, 'ויתעצב אל לבו'" (בראשית ה, ו)?

אמר לו: "נולד לך בן זכר מימך?"

אמר לו: "הן".

אמר לו: "ומה עשית?"

אמר לו: "שמחתי ושימחתי את הכל".

אמר לו: "ולא היית יודע שסופו למות?"

אמר לו: "בשעת חדותא, בשעת אבלא אבלא".

אמר לו: "כך מעשה הקדוש ברוך הוא. אף על פי שגלוי לפניו שסופן לחטוא ולאבדן, לא נמנע מלבראן בשביל הצדיקים העתידים לעמוד מהם".

A heretic asked Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korchah, "Do you not admit that G-d foresees the future?"

Rabbi Yehoshua replied, "Yes."

The heretic retorted, "But the passage states, 'And He became grieved in His heart'" (Genesis 5:6).

Rabbi Yehoshua replied, "Was a son ever born to you?"

"Yes."

"And what did you do?"

"I rejoiced and ensured that everyone else rejoiced as well."

"But did you not know that he was destined to die?"

"At the time of joy, joy; at the time of mourning, mourning."

Rabbi Yehoshua replied, "So is it with G-d. Though He knew that the people would sin, and that He would destroy them, He created them for the sake of the righteous people who would arise from them."

TEXT 8B

*The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, Torat
Menachem 5751:1, p. 201*

סגנון שאלתו של אפיקורוס - "אי אתם מודים
שהקדוש ברוך הוא רואה את הנולד . . . והא כתיב
ויתעצב אל לבו" (בראשית ה, ו) - היא באופן של
אפיקורסות, ש"מוכיח" ממה שכתוב "ויתעצב אל לבו"
שאי אפשר לומר שהקדוש ברוך הוא רואה את הנולד.

אבל ילד יהודי שואל בסגנון הפוך: ברור ומוחלט אצלו
בוודאות גמורה שהתורה היא אמת, משה אמת ותורתו
אמת. וברור אצלו ללא כל ספק שהקדוש ברוך הוא
רואה את הנולד וכו', אלא שרוצה להבין (בשכלו) מהי
ההסברה בשינוי מחשבתו של הקדוש ברוך הוא, מהי
הסיבה שהביאה לשינוי מחשבתו של הקדוש ברוך
הוא, וכיוצא בזה.

The heretic asks questions in a heretical style: "How can you believe that G-d foreknows the future if the passage states, 'He became grieved in His heart'" (Genesis 5:6)? His point is that it is impossible to believe that G-d knows the future.

A Jew asks the same question, but in the opposite manner. We are absolutely certain that the Torah is true, that G-d foresees the future, etc. However, we seek to understand how there can be a change or what causes change in G-d's mind, etc.



We ask questions because G-d told us to ask. We don't ask questions of G-d; we ask them for G-d—to connect with Him through our minds and hearts.

TEXT 9A

*The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, Likutei Sichot
23, pp. 93–94*

דער טעם פארוואס דער אויבערשטער האט ניט
אנגעזאגט אויף שילוח המרגלים, נאר "שלח לך -
לדעתך":

היות אז דער מכוון פון שילוח המרגלים איז צו
אויפטאן ביי אידן דעם "נשמע" בנוגע דער כניסה
לארץ, איז דעריבער אויך דער שילוח גופא געקומען
אין אן אופן פון "לדעתך" - אז מען טוט עס ווייל אזוי
דארף זיין מצד דעת (און ניט בלויז אין אן אופן פון
"נעשה", ווייל "אני מצוה לך").

The reason G-d left the decision to Moses
with "if you want to send, send":

The purpose of sending the spies was to
activate the "we will listen" dimension of
Judaism—enabling the people to understand
how they would conquer Israel. Therefore,
the dispatch itself had to come from them:
"If you want to send, send." It had to be done
because they felt it necessary to send spies,
not because G-d instructed it.

TEXT 9B

*The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, Ibid.*

דער אויבערשטער האט טאקע געזאגט אידן אז זי איז
אן ארץ טובה ורחבה גו' - אבער דער אויבערשטער
ווייל אז אידן זאלן איינזען דעם גוטס פון ארץ ישראל
אויך בשכלם הם.

און דעריבער האט משה רבינו געהייסן ברענגען מפרי
הארץ, כדי אז דער רצון פון אידן צו גיין קיין ארץ
ישראל זאל זיין (ניט נאר ווייל אזוי האט דער
אויבערשטער געהייסן ובמילא פאלגן זיי דעם ציווי ה'
(נעשה) — נאר) אויך מצד זיי אליין, זיי פארשטייען
אז מ'דארף וועלן גיין קיין ארץ ישראל, ווייל זי איז די
אמת'ע ארץ טובה ורחבה.

G-d had indeed informed the Jews that Israel is a good and prosperous land, but G-d wanted the Jews to understand this truth on their own.

Moses, therefore, instructed the spies to bring back some of the fruit. When the people would behold the fruit, they would surmise that it is truly a good and prosperous land. Their desire for Israel would be kindled, not because G-d had instructed it and they had pledged to obey Him, but because they would truly want to go.



You can't compare
hearing about something
to seeing it. When they
saw the actual fruit, the
reports about the land
became real for them and
ignited their desire to go.

TEXT 9C

*The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, Ibid.*

און די זעלבע זאך איז בנוגע דעם (ערשטן) טייל פון
זייער שליחות - צו אויסגעפינען אין וועלכן וועג מ'זאל
קובש זיין ארץ ישראל, אז די כוונה דערביי איז געווען
אז אידן זאלן איינזען בשכלם ווי "יכול נוכל לה".

The same applies to the first part of their mission—to discover the surest methods to conquer Israel. G-d's purpose was to enable the Jews to understand, not just to be told, that the land could be conquered.

TEXT 10

*The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, Sefer
Hasichot 5749:2, p. 538*

לא זו בלבד שמשה לא חשש שיש כאן ענין בלתי רצוי
אלא אדרבה היה שמח על החידוש שבדיבור זה. שעבודת
המטה תוכל להיות באופן של בחירה חפשית לגמרי ללא
ההכרח דציווי הקדוש ברוך הוא כי אם מדעתו ומרצונו
של האדם. שיהיו מתאימים מעצמם לרצונו של הקדוש
ברוך הוא.

Not only was Moses unconcerned that G-d's ambiguous response portended a negative outcome, he was elated over the new opportunity. Jews would now be empowered to serve G-d because they chose to rather than because they felt compelled by G-d's instructions. To do what G-d wants because they understand it to be good and want to do it. To be spontaneously synchronized with G-d's will.

KEY POINTS

1. The foundation of Judaism is to accept the truth of G-d and to obey Him without thinking.
2. The ultimate form of Judaism is to probe, ask, and understand so that our minds and hearts are aligned with G-d's thoughts and wishes.
3. The license to think is not a license to reject, but there is a risk that some might take it that way.
4. To avoid this, it helps to remember that we don't ask to satisfy our curiosity, but because G-d wants us to connect with Him through our minds and hearts.

KEY POINTS

5. This shapes the way we formulate our questions. Rather than questioning the Torah's truth, we seek to understand it. If we fail, we don't reject. We simply keep looking.
6. Sending the spies was the first experiment with independent thought. Although the spies misused their license, we learn from their mistakes and get it right.

