



SERMON SH'LACH L'CHA:¹
PRITI PATEL AND THE TWELVE SPIES

Erev Rav Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 18 June 2022
Birmingham Progressive Synagogue

- 1 Rwanda, according to a leaflet given by the Home Office to those at risk of being deported there, “is home to a wide array of wildlife”, and has a “striking landscape”.² But also, according to a Home Office human rights report: “The Rwandan government has a long history of repressing its political opponents. The police employ torture. Refugees are prohibited from gathering together in groups based on ethnicity or nationality. Refugee women and girls are at a disproportionate risk of gender-based violence, including ‘survival sex’ in exchange for food or water.”³

- 2 Israel, according to Caleb and Joshua, was “a land flowing with milk and honey, and bearing fruit.”⁴ But also, according to the other ten spies sent to scout it out: “The people who live there are fierce giants. The land devours its inhabitants.”⁵



- 3 Now, the report of the ten spies is often derided as being a ‘slandorous report’, or even that wonderful old-fashioned word ‘a calumny’. But in fact, the rabbis acknowledged that everything they said was factually true: there was a disease about, which led to so many Canaanite deaths that it may well have been said that the land was devouring its inhabitants,⁶ and there were indeed giants living there who, when they caught glimpses of the spies, described them as “grasshoppers that look like people”.⁷
- 4 Nonetheless, despite the fact that they told the truth, Moses, Caleb and Joshua tried to counter that truth with a different truth: milk, honey and massive fruit.
- 5 Rwanda may well have beautiful vistas, and the Promised Land may well have been flowing with milk and honey. But both places also suffer from, to put it mildly, downsides.
- 6 Attempting to override one true statement with another true statement is a surprisingly common, and surprisingly tiresome,



debating tactic. How many times have we heard people responding to Boris Johnson's illegal partying by praising him for his delivery of the covid vaccine, or trying to move the conversation on from Israel's demolition of Palestinians' homes by pointing out Israel's strong record on LGBT rights?

- 7 This tactic tiresome because it is always – always – an attempt to belittle genuine, and legitimate, concerns. There is real and genuine anger about lockdown-busting parties, and the fact that the government has done some good stuff as well does not somehow erase or expunge those parties. Rwanda's incredible wildlife will be of little consolation to asylum seekers who are deported there to face risks of isolation, police brutality and sexual abuse.
- 8 And there is little point living in a land of milk and honey if you are liable to be trodden on by a giant at any moment – a giant in whose eyes you look like a grasshopper.



- 9 In fact, the grasshopper is itself another one of these dual-truths. Grasshoppers are incredibly hardy animals: they can fly or jump away from predators, and in extremis they can spit acid.⁸ Yet they are also highly vulnerable, maybe not so much to animal predators but certainly to humans. True, they have defence mechanisms, but those defence mechanisms are of no use against a human foot.
- 10 In many ways, this makes the grasshopper a perfect metaphor for a refugee. Refugees have survived, fought through, dangers and troubles and trials and tribulations that most of us could never begin to imagine. Anyone who can cross the English Channel in a tiny dinghy is a model of resilience deserving of our admiration and wonder. Yet refugees are also vulnerable, occupying perhaps the weakest and most exposed position in society.
- 11 The Aramaic word for 'grasshopper' is קמצא, which comes from the root ק-מ-ץ. This root can also mean 'to shut one's eyes'.⁹ And it is all too easy to shut our eyes to refugees, and to the evidence of their mistreatment.



12 In today's parashah, we read about how, when the ten spies were revealing that they had seen giants, "Caleb hushed the people".¹⁰ Note that he didn't hush the ten spies: he hushed the people. He was supposed to be a leader, but when the people had concerns – concerns which, incidentally, we know were based on an honest report of pestilence and giants – he told them to be quiet and then tried¹¹ to wow them with tales of how bountiful the land was. Trying to overwrite one truth with another, more palatable, truth.

13 The fact is, land is complicated. Natural beauty can be offset by human barbarism; that was the case in ancient Israel, with its giants, and that is the case in Rwanda, with its deeply suspect human rights record. When they hush people who articulate concerns about this, leaders are not exercising leadership.

¹ Numbers 13:25-33

² Anushka Asthana. ITV News (27 May 2022): <<https://twitter.com/anushkaasthana/status/1530256086426599424>>

³ Home Office. *Country policy and information note: Rwanda, general human rights* (11 May 2022): <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/rwanda-country-policy-and-information->



notes/country-policy-and-information-note-rwanda-general-human-rights-may-2022-accessible>

⁴ Numbers 13:27

⁵ Numbers 13:28, 32

⁶ b.Sotah 35a

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Kate Piercy. *How do grasshoppers protect themselves?* Meadowia (undated): <<https://meadowia.com/grasshoppers-protect-themselves/>>

⁹ See eg y.Shabbat 14:1, 13b

¹⁰ Numbers 13:30

¹¹ Numbers 14:8