



**SERMON SH'LACH L'CHA:ⁱ
THE SHERIDAN HOTEL INCIDENT**

**Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 10 June 2023
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue**

1 In November 1983, the Australian Secret Intelligence Service held a training exercise for a group of new recruits.ⁱⁱ Their task was to 'rescue a hostage', in reality an experienced officer from the Service's training department, from a room in the Sheraton Hotel in Melbourne.

2 Unfortunately, the organisers of the exercise had omitted to tell the hotel management – or local police – that a group of heavily-armed masked men were about to use a sledgehammer to smash down the door of one of the rooms and make off with one of its occupants. The agent playing the hostage, meanwhile, having helped himself liberally to the minibar at public expense, decided to lie naked in an empty bath, because he thought it would make proceedings more exciting if he pretended to have been drugged by his 'captors'.

3 As was entirely predictable, things went very wrong indeed. Guns were pointed at members of the public. There was considerable damage to the hotel. Onlookers were terrified.

4 A subsequent public inquiry into the debacle was extremely critical of the exercise's "excessive realism". An irritable, though justifiable, footnote added: "If it is deemed necessary to train agents in the breaking down of doors then the Service ought to use its own doors for practice."

5 However, the most interesting section of the report was that which struggled to decide where responsibility lay. The organiser of the exercise was guilty of failing to prevent it from spiralling out of control. His commanders were guilty of inadequately supervising him. The trainees themselves were, clearly, guilty of getting carried away, and crossed a line when they pointed their guns at members of the public. But equally, those who designed the training programme were guilty of filling their



students' minds with aggression: getting them all keyed up. And the agent playing the hostage clearly enjoyed his role far too much.

6 This morning, we read from Parashat Sh'lach L'cha, which is the Torah's own story of a spy training mission gone wrong. Moses sent twelve young men to scout out the land of Israel, but not because he genuinely needed the intelligence they would bring back: he tasked them with finding out whether or not the land was good,ⁱⁱⁱ but he knew perfectly well that it was good because God had told him so.^{iv}

7 The 13th-century commentator Ramban tells us^v that the people were becoming agitated by the prospect of entering unknown territory, and Moses was hopeful that hearing twelve independent witnesses confirm how bounteous it was would calm things down.

8 The mission backfired when the spies came back with outlandish reports of unconquerable giants. But how did it go wrong? A midrash suggests:^{vi} "The twelve spies were great men,



but they made fools of themselves. They were righteous, but then they changed.” This is the ‘bad barrel’ theory of human nature: some people are bad apples, but even good apples will, if placed into a bad barrel, become bad apples.^{vii} Send twelve teenage boys away from their parents for the first time, into a strange new world, and they’re inevitably going to come back with tall tales to wow their audience – especially when Moses himself put ideas into their heads, specifically raising the prospect of fierce enemies living in fortified towns.^{viii} Similarly, we might say that nobody involved in the Sheraton Hotel incident was intrinsically a hooligan, but if you tell a bunch of impressionable young men that they’re now responsible for Australia’s national security, then hand them a sledgehammer, they’re going to end up using it to break down a door.

9 I also have a sneaking suspicion that Moses wanted to give the restless and volatile youths under his charge something to do, and to give himself and the remainder of the community some respite from their macho troublemaking.



10 I'm using masculine words a lot here: men, boys, macho, aggression. This is not a coincidence. As long ago as the 17th century, the commentator Kli Yakar found it entirely unsurprising that the twelve spies with their wild stories were men. He imagined God saying to Moses:^{ix} "In My opinion" – God's opinion, that is – "bearing in mind that I can see the future, it would be better to send women on this expedition. You think that these men are suitable, so go ahead and send them as you wish. But in My view, women would be preferable." He then cites several examples of female Israelites being more level-headed, law-abiding and generally stable and responsible members of society.

11 In the end, as with the Sheraton Hotel incident, everyone bore some responsibility. Moses did not properly frame and plan the operation. God did not exercise proper control over Moses. The overwhelming majority of the twelve spies hyped each other up into a feedback loop of epic proportions.



12 Moses took a rash decision out of his own convenience; God let him get away with it; a bunch of young men were allowed to lead themselves, and the whole of the Israelite people, astray; and the womenfolk, who had the skills and personalities to remedy the situation, were sidelined altogether.

13 In the context of the security services, it is increasingly understood that women's participation is vital. The security studies scholar Lauren Hutton has observed: "Integrating a gender perspective will enable the intelligence sector to see problems not only as 'hard' security issues but as related to rights and freedoms, too. Intelligence products that integrate a gender perspective are more able to question assumptions about power politics. Integrating a gender perspective in considerations of national security enables a focus on the human impact."^x

14 The story of Parashat Sh'lach L'cha is a reminder about the need for fresh ideas and bold and diverse leadership. Our society today, and our Jewish community today, is nowhere near



as patriarchal as that run by Moses, but nonetheless this parashah calls us to look to our own collective failings of leadership as well.

כן יהי רצון, may this be God's will.

ⁱ Numbers 13:25-14:1

ⁱⁱ Royal Commission on Australia's Intelligence and Security Agencies. *Report on the Sheraton Hotel incident* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, February 1984).

ⁱⁱⁱ Numbers 13:19

^{iv} Exodus 3:8

^v Ramban to Numbers 13:2

^{vi} Numbers Rabbah 16:5

^{vii} Philip Zimbardo. *The Lucifer Effect: understanding how good people turn evil* (New York: Random House, 2007): 10.

^{viii} Numbers 13:18-19

^{ix} Kli Yakar to Numbers 13:2, cited by Rabbi Sylvia Rothschild in her blog post, "The faith of women is overlooked and the result is catastrophic" (13 June 2017): <<https://rabbisylviarothschild.com/2017/06/13/parashat-shelach-lecha-the-faith-of-women-is-overlooked-and-the-result-is-catastrophic/>>

^{*} Lauren Hutton, *Intelligence and Gender* (Geneva: Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, 2019), <<https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2019/GS-toolkit-Tool-14-en.pdf>>: 22.

