

PARSHAT SHELACH: IS HOPE IRRATIONAL?

SABBATH TABLE OUTLINE

- I. Hope vs. Hopelessness
- Hope is more appealing, but it lives in the imagination.
 - Hopelessness seems more realistic and rational (i.e. understanding how things really are).
 - But is reality really at odds with hope?
- II. This Week's Parsha
- When the people were convinced by the spies that there was no hope in Israel, "ותשא כל" the congregation lifted up their voice and cried; they wept that night" (14:1).
 - That expression – "lifting up a voice and crying" – is used throughout Tanakh to describe a feeling of hopelessness, when something slips through one's fingers:
 - Hagar, when she cries for her son, Ishmael
 - Esau, when he cries over the lost blessing (given to Jacob)
 - Jacob, when he first meets Rachel, yet intuits that they'll never really unite.
 - Here, the phrase is used to indicate the feeling that they'll never be able to get Israel.
 - What happens next is a study into the dynamics of hopelessness.
 - "The people complained to Moses and Aharon... "If only we had died in the land of **Egypt!** If only we had died in the desert!" (14:2)
 - "Why did God bring us to this land just to die by the sword... wouldn't it have been better to return to **Egypt?**" (14:3)
 - "And they said to each other: Let's appoint a leader and return to **Egypt!**" (14:4)



Numbers 14:2-4

<p>ב וַיִּלְנוּ עַל-מֹשֶׁה וְעַל-אַהֲרֹן, כָּל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל; וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם כָּל-הָעֵדָה, לֹא-מִתְּנוּ בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם, אוֹ בַּמִּדְבָּר הַזֶּה, לֹא-מִתְּנוּ.</p> <p>ג וְלָמָּה יְהוָה מְבִיא אֶתְנוּ אֶל-הָאֶרֶץ הַזֹּאת, לִנְפֹל בַּחֶרֶב--נָשִׁינוּ וְטַפְּנוּ, יֶהְיוּ לְבָז; הֲלוֹא טוֹב לָנוּ, שׁוּב מִצְרָיִם.</p> <p>ד וַיֹּאמְרוּ, אִישׁ אֶל-אָחִיו: נַתְּנָה רֹאשׁ, וְנָשׁוּבָה מִצְרָיִם.</p>	<p>2 And all the children of Israel murmured against Moses and against Aaron; and the whole congregation said unto them: 'Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! or would we had died in this wilderness!</p> <p>3 And wherefore doth the LORD bring us unto this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will be a prey; were it not better for us to return into Egypt!'</p> <p>4 And they said one to another: 'Let us make a captain, and let us return into Egypt.'</p>
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1. Egypt plays a big role!
2. There are 3 stages regarding the role of Egypt:
 - a. “If only we had died in Egypt”
 - i. The theme is “if only we had died”; Egypt’s role isn’t so central.
 - b. “Why did God bring us here – wouldn’t it have been better in Egypt?”
 - i. The focus is still on why we’re here, but Egypt plays more of a role: isn’t Egypt better?
 - c. “Let’s go back to Egypt!”
 - i. Egypt is front and center.
3. What happened?
 - a. They began speaking about Egypt tangentially, and then it started working its way more and more into its consciousness.

C. Rational Analysis of Their Arguments

- i. Is dying in Egypt really better than dying while battling for the Land of Israel?
 1. Hopelessness, like hope, is also the imagination – but it’s regarding the *past*.
 - a. They looked back and imagined how *good* Egypt was.
 2. Hopelessness is not about realism. Humans *always* imagine – but it matters about we imagine – the past or the future.
 - a. Imagination is constructive when it’s directed at the future.
 - b. It’s destructive when directed at the past.



3. We can train ourselves to be productive imaginers.
 - a. We can use imagination to consider better futures, and to make that better future come alive.