

Parashat Shelach

Is it Dangerous to Live in Israel?



Dear Rebbetzin Chana Bracha,

I grew up in NY and received a *Chareidi* education. While I love my family and my community, I somehow feel out of place here. I'm yearning for greater spirituality and closeness to Hashem and really wanted to live in the Holy Land or at the very least visit and get inspired. When I asked my Rabbi about going to Israel, he responded that it is not a good idea, because it is dangerous. So, I listened to my Rabbi and stayed in NY for an entire year, but I still feel torn. I want to respect my Rabbi, but on the other hand, I'm really miserable and lonely in NY, and my heart is telling me that my place is in Israel. What do you think? I really hope you can help advise me what to do, because I cannot go on like this.

Fayga Samuels (name changed)

Dear Fayga,

I commend you on your desire to do the right thing and respect your Rabbi. It is indeed very important in the Torah that we respect our Rabbis, otherwise each person would just do "whatever is straight in their eyes" and that would certainly undermine the authority of Jewish law. On the other hand, if your Rabbi tells you to disregard a fundamental mitzvah in the Torah, which numerous other respectable Orthodox Rabbis uphold, then you cannot follow your rabbi blindly. The soul of every Jew has a Divine spark, and when we truly yearn for closeness with Hashem and for truth, we receive guidance, that may differ from our Rabbis' advice. When we desire to respect our rabbis, yet simultaneously listen to our inner voice, we can ask our Rabbi for advice rather than for a halachic decision which is binding upon us. The nature of your question to your rabbi sounds more like a request for advice rather than for a halachic ruling, and it is therefore not binding.

Overcoming Fears to Receive Hashem's Protection

In this week's parasha, we learn about the sin of the spies. They were the selected leaders of their tribes. Nevertheless, they sinned because they thought it was dangerous to conquer the Land of Israel. For thousands of years, throughout the generations, we still bear the consequences of the sin of the spies. Thus, we fast for their sin and ours every year on the 9th of Av. Hashem has promised us the Land of Israel numerous times, and in recent time, He has wrought great miracles for us, so that after two thousand years of exile, finally, the Promised Land is once again in Jewish hands. Nevertheless, we are still filled with fears, because we do not have enough *bitachon*, (trust) in Hashem's promise. I'm not just blaming your rabbi; we all share some of his fear, each of us with a different fear threshold. For some people, the entire land of Israel seems dangerous. Others fear visiting the settlements on the other side of the green line. Then again, some people are afraid to pray at the holy burial site of our patriarchs and matriarchs in the city of Chevron. Even some of the most courageous of us may still be afraid to drive through Arab settlements, in our own country! Divine providence and protection depends on the level of our bitachon. "He who trusts in Hashem will be surrounded by kindness" (*Tehillim* 32:10). If a person's trust in Hashem is perfect, the angels of Heaven watch his every footstep, so that nothing in the world can possibly harm him (*Toldot Ya'akov Yosef, Parashat Mikeitz*). Even if many harsh decrees have been passed in Heaven against a person, his trust in Hashem can protect him and prevent the punishment from befalling him (The Ba'al Shem

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Tov, *Keter Shem Tov*). As David HaMelech said, "He who trusts in Hashem is like the Mountain of Tzion, which will never falter and will remain forever" (*Tehillim* 121:1). Thus, the more we trust Hashem, and delight in the mitzvah of living in the Land of Israel, the more we draw down His Divine providence and protection. This is congruent with the concept of the law of attraction, so popular in the new age movement.

Continuing the Sin of the Spies

"The great sages would kiss the borders of *Eretz Yisrael*, kiss its stones, and roll in its dust. as, it states 'Behold, your servants hold her stones dear and cherish her dust'" (*Tehillim* 102:15); (Rambam, *Laws of Kings* 5:10). Why does the Rambam include these deeds in his halacha book? We would expect such stories to belong in a book of Jewish ethics, rather than in a book of Jewish law. The reason is to teach us that it is not enough to live in the Land of Israel. We are moreover obligated to love our good and Holy Land. The sin of the spies was that they spoke Lashon Hara about the Land of Israel, saying, "It is a land that eats its inhabitants" (*Bamidbar* 13:32), thus making the land undesirable to their generation. They moreover sinned by their fear and lack of trusting in Hashem, saying, that it is impossible to conquer the Promised Land. Although the prohibition of Lashon Hara only pertains to speaking about people, and not about trees and stones, it is still forbidden to speak Lashon Hara about the Land of Israel. The reason is that speaking badly about the Land of Israel prevents the revelation of Hashem's name in the world, which specifically is revealed in the Holy Land. Therefore, the punishment of those who speak against the Land of Israel is very serious. Even the holy generation, who received the Torah at Sinai, was punished by the decree of death and 40 years of wandering in the desert because of their despondency regarding the Land of Israel (Rav Eliezer Melamed, *Yishuv Ha'Aretz* p. 15).

Protecting the General Community of Israel from Danger

We can't really be sure where in the world it is dangerous to live. Recently, there have been terrorist attacks in both North America and Europe. Life in general is dangerous. Just getting into a car anywhere.... but we cannot live in constant fear. When our time is up, it's up. So, we may as well live where we can best serve Hashem, and for a Jew that is in *Eretz Yisrael*. If every Jew was afraid to live in the Land of Israel, it would not only be much more dangerous to live in Israel, it would be extremely dangerous for a Jew to live anywhere in the world. The fact that the Land of Israel is in Jewish hands ensures that a holocaust can never be repeated. Even if it would be more dangerous to live in Israel than elsewhere, we are still required to endanger ourselves somewhat, to save the lives of another Jew, as it states, "You shall not stand by [the shedding of] your fellow's blood" (*Vayikra* 19:16). Rabbi Melamed teaches that to live in a *Yishuv*, in a disputed area that borders Arab villages protects the lives of Jews in the rest of Israel. Therefore, it is a great mitzvah to live in such a place even if it may be somewhat dangerous, since this protects the general community of Israel from danger.

The Merit of Eretz Yisrael Protects Us

The merit of the Land of Israel protects us from danger. The *Ba'al HaTanya* wrote when he was released from prison: "This was all Hashem's doing. He has arranged this by virtue of the merit of the Holy Land and its inhabitants. This is what stood by our side and will always assist in relieving us from the oppressor and delivering us from distress" (David Tzvi Hillman, *Iggrot Ba'a HaTanya*, 62). This concept can be found in "I will remember My covenant with Ya'acov, and also My covenant with

Yitzchak, and also My covenant with Avraham I will remember and I will remember the Land” (*Vayikra* 26:42). Rashi asks why the Patriarchs are written in the reverse. He explains, that Ya’acov the youngest is worthy to bring redemption, but if he is not sufficiently worthy, then Yitzchak is with him; but if he is not sufficiently worthy, then Avraham is with him (Rashi, *Ibid.*). Rabbi Teichtal takes Rashi’s commentary a step further and explains that we can learn from the sequence of our Torah verses, that even if the merit of all the Patriarchs runs out, still “I will remember the land” –the merit of Eretz Yisrael will deliver us from distress (*Eim HaBanim Semeichah* pp. 33-34). Your soul, Fayga, yearns to live in Israel since it knows the truth: there is nothing to fear when it comes to the mitzvah of living in the Land of Israel – a mitzvah which is the equivalent of all the Mitzvot in the Torah (*Sifrei, Parashat Re’eh* 28). “A person should live in the land of Israel – even in a city where the majority are non-Jews. He should not live outside of Israel, even in a city that is predominately populated by Jews” (Rambam, *Mishne Torah, Hilchot Melachim* 5:12). So, I hope that you will follow your heart and join us in the Holy Land!