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torah
QUEERIES

Welcome to Torah Queeries, a joint project of Jewish Mosaic and the World Congress of GLBT Jews! Check back regularly for creative and incisive "queer" takes on the weekly Torah portion or Jewish holiday, brought to you by some of the Jewish world's most dynamic scholars, rabbis, activists and lay leaders.

The Peculiar Fiber in the Garment of Humanity

by **Maggid Jhos Singer**

Parashat Shelach Lecha — Numbers 13:1 - 15:41

on Saturday June 9, 2007 (23 Sivan 5767)

In 1975 I was, quite possibly, the world's most insufferable High School Band Nerd (I know that the PC term now is "Band Geek," but in my era we used Nerd—you can look this up in Wikipedia if you doubt me). I lived for Marching Band. I despised football, but that didn't deter me at all. So what if I spent every fall weekend enduring the Neanderthal ritual of "Hup one, Hup two, Hike!?" If it meant I got six minutes of playing *I Can't Stop Loving You* while being part of a giant cowboy boot formation that tapped its toe, it was worth it! I cherished being part of that enormous organism. I loved everything about it – the instruments, the faux/fey militarism (the uniforms, spats and that big fuzzy hat—known as a "shako" n.b. scrabble players!), the kitschy music, and the community.

It took a week to prepare a show. Monday morning we would get the chart detailing the week's halftime show. I'd study it all day, sometimes even spending my lunch hour walking through the routine on the football field. In my senior year we did a show that featured a company front (a single line of the entire band facing forward). If everything went according to design, 113 kids would simultaneously move from various points around the field into one perfect line, facing the stands, with every horn blaring out the fanfare from *25 or 6 to 4*. By the time practice began I had all my steps memorized. After each squad walked through their part of the routine, our drum major took the podium and set the whole band into motion.

By this time in my Band Nerdism, I had mastered the art of "8 to 5" (8 steps to 5 yards, each step exactly 22.5 inches, heel to heel). I could easily march 50 yards blindfolded hitting each yard line with my right heel every 8th step. I was a marching machine. I was concentrating like mad as we ran the show—left, right, left, right, pivot left, right, left, right, step turn, and on and on until BANG, I hit my position dead on. Yes!!! I looked up at the stands for praise from our beloved director, beaming with pride, confident that my execution had been flawless. He was blowing his whistle and pointing at me and yelling. I couldn't hear him very well at first, and then I caught his words, "SINGER, STEP BACK!!!!" I didn't understand. I looked down at the field marker, and

I was exactly where the chart said I should be. He yelled again, "LOOK AROUND YOU AND STEP BACK, SINGER, OR DO YOU EXPECT 112 OTHER PEOPLE TO JOIN YOU!?!?!" I looked to either side of me, and was shocked to find that there was no one else on the line. The entire rest of the band was about 26 inches behind me. It looked like this:

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I yelled back, "BUT I'M RIGHT!" And the director yelled back, "YEAH, THAT'S YOUR PROBLEM!!!"

Every time I read this week's parasha, Shelach Lecha, I remember that day on the band field, how it felt to be right but alone. I remember the shock that came with the realization that being right is relative, not absolute. It was one of the most important spiritual lessons of my life, really. In that moment, my lifelong faith in equations, rules and facts started to crumble. And all of a sudden I had to explore the value of relationship, passion and process as equally important. When do we choose to step out in the defense of what we know to be right, and when do we step back to be a part of the imperfect collective?

In this week's Torah portion, Moses sends out 12 spies, one from each tribe, to scout out the Promised Land (Bamidbar 14: 1-10). They go and explore for 40 days, and upon their return, 10 of them report that the Land is a death trap and recommend aborting the mission altogether, going as far as to suggest returning to Egypt. But 2 of the scouts – Joshua and Caleb – report that the land is very, very good, and advise that the Israelites faithfully and fearlessly proceed. Joshua and Caleb are not only in the minority; they are holding an idea that is extremely unpopular, and they come dangerously close to being stoned to death by the community for their views.

A few verses later we read the brief story of a man who is gathering wood on Shabbat (Bamidbar 15:32-36). He is captured, jailed, judged and pelted to death with stones by the entire community. The final paragraph of the text (Bamidbar 15: 37-40) describes our tribal costume. We are told, "Fringe the edges of your garments, for all generations, and include in the fringe a single strand of blue. And it will be a fringe for you, and you shall see it and be mindful of the directions of your Creator, and you shall do them. And you shall not scout after your heart and after your eyes, to that which you whore after."

Each of these teachings gives us some insight regarding the power and danger of non-conformity. We might intentionally step out of line with our community based on conviction and a sense of what is true or right, or we might find ourselves defying social rules out of ignorance, innocence, confusion or apathy. Either way, once we are out of alignment, we will be like that strand of blue, a reminder to make a distinction between passion and lust, between revolution and rebellion.

There are times we will indeed find ourselves holding a minority opinion, standing out, and being different. It is supposed to happen, and when it does, we need to be alert and aware and alive. Indeed, the risk we take when we defy social custom is serious. Every Jew and every queer person knows that there may be a high price to pay. Under what conditions should we put ourselves into that kind of danger? I see Joshua and Caleb as exemplary radicals whose vision of a better life for everyone was at the core of their faith. Their passion and courage surmounted the public outrage that rose against them. They had the capacity to cling to a dream. They were bound for the Promised Land—whatever the price. Their goal defined them, and they lived to see it through. Visionary, bold and daring, they stood on their mark and said, "We will not step back!"

In contrast, although Mr. Wood Gatherer is also out of step with his community, he seems to transgress unconsciously. In fact, throughout the entire incident he never says a word. He doesn't defend himself, nor does he apologize. He doesn't rail against the horror of it, nor does he stoically claim martyrdom. I have to wonder what the Torah is insinuating with this tragic fellow. Did he violate out of dull habit, mindless attachment to the mundane, apathy? Perhaps out of poor self-esteem? Maybe he didn't believe he deserved the gift of Shabbat. Was his identity as a slave so deeply ingrained in him that he simply couldn't let go of familiar drudgery? He is alone, passive and ultimately tragic. Every time I read his story I want him to speak up, at the very least just say it was a mistake, step back into the line of community, or go down fighting. I find

his plight just as riveting as Joshua and Caleb's stoicism. I have the urge to stand up on his behalf, shout at the mob to leave him alone. I experience his story like that anomalous blue thread— it shakes me up and focuses my heart.

The Torah reveals that the role of the dissenter, the outcast, the radical, the oddball, the lunatic fringe is a vital part life's fabric. As Jews we must be profoundly aware of this. Judaism is a tiny blip on the world population radar screen (making up .227% of the world's population*), yet we account for close to 23% of the Nobel Prize winners. Similarly 3-5% of the U.S. population identifies themselves as lesbian, gay or bisexual—another remarkably small group of people. But consider the enormous contribution, especially in the arts and politics, the queer community has made to the world. And Gay Jews??? Let me count the ways!

Like the *techelet*, the blue thread, we stand out. We are the peculiar fiber in the garment of humanity. We are here to awaken and remind. Some of us will affect the world through our focused efforts, implementing our visions, realizing our dreams. And some of us will push the envelope by simply being who we are, going about our everyday business. Some of us will touch the world with the blazing fire of the Prophets: Harvey Milk, Bella Abzug, Rabbis Steve Greenberg and Benay Lappe. But we will also affect the world simply by being in the world, standing out of line, living astray of convention. There will be times when we choose to step back, blend in, but if that is what we choose, I pray that we only do so as a stop gap measure, as a way to buy ourselves some time while our visions ripen and our hearts get strong.

*"I am bound for the Promised Land, I am bound for the Promised Land
Oh, who will come, and go with me? I am bound for the Promised Land."*
--1800's American Hymn

*US State Department's *International Religious Freedom Report 2004*



About the Author:

Maggid Jhos Singer received ordination/semicha from Rabbi Gershon Winkler in 2002, and has served the Coastside Jewish Community in Half Moon Bay, California, as their rabbi/maggid since 2000. Jhos holds a degree in music from UCLA and when he isn't preaching to the flock he is playing and singing with them. Maggid Singer especially loves teaching on the paradoxical, profound, perilous and paranormal ways of the Jewish path. Being transgender, Maggid Singer is well suited to understand and transmit the Torah's many contradictions and complexities with insight, love, deep faith and good humor. Singer lives in Berkeley, California, where he tends a clutch of young children and enjoys a wonderful relationship with his bashert.