

Drashot by Eli Filosov on his Bar Mitzvah

Beth Chayim Chadashim, Los Angeles
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My Torah portion is called Sh'lach l'kha, and it is about the Israelite people finally arriving at the land of Canaan. When they got there, Moses sent twelve spies into the land of Canaan to scope it out. When they came back, ten of them told the Israelites that the land was awesome, with very big and tasty fruit, but also with very big and strong citizens who would most likely kill the Israelites if they tried to fight.

They reported that "We appear as grasshoppers to ourselves, and so we appear to them." Caleb and Joshua, the other two spies, came back with a different point of view. They remembered G-d's promise to bring the Israelites into the land and help them defeat the Canaanites, so they told the people that it was okay to enter the land. But when the Israelites heard what the ten unfaithful spies had to say, they got very frightened and wanted to go back to Egypt where they had been enslaved.

When G-d heard what the Israelites wanted to do, G-d got furious because even though most of the Israelites had seen what G-d could do, they still didn't believe G-d would be able to protect them. G-d got fed up with their lack of faith and wanted to kill them all. But Moses said that that was not a good plan because G-d would seem weak to the other nations, taking the Israelites out of Egypt only to kill them in the desert. Adonai Adonai, El rachum v'chanun. God full of compassion, this isn't your best idea. So instead, G-d only did away with the 10 spies, and told the rest of the Israelites that they themselves would never enter the land. Instead they would wander in the desert for 40 years, and it would be their children that would come into the land that G-d had promised to them.

So how does my Torah portion connect to growing up in BCC? In my torah portion, the ten spies were made to feel like grasshoppers - less than human. Here in America, Gay and Lesbians were and are made to feel like grasshoppers. I believe that GLBTI people have not seen themselves as grasshoppers because gays know who they are, and they know that what prejudice people say about them is not true. Even though I am not gay, I have known gay people all my life so I don't think that they are any stranger than anybody else.

What have I learned from growing up in BCC?

Growing up in a gay and lesbian temple makes me more mature about homosexuality. Being around a lot of gay and lesbian people growing up showed me that there is nothing weird or unusual about them and there is nothing to make fun of.

My understanding of difference and inclusivity is different than kids I know. Other kids I know might have a gay cousin or uncle, but never actually get to have conversations with them. Other young kids might think something is wrong with them, but I don't. Kids in elementary school would always use the word "Gay" as meaning stupid, like "That's so gay!" But growing up in BCC, I know it doesn't.

When my friends used to visit BCC, some kids would ask questions about some of the members of the congregation. One question that I remember hearing a lot was, "guys can like other guys?!" Then I would always have to explain to them over, and over again about how in fact guys can like other guys.

One thing that I have learned at BCC are that some of my friends who have grown up with two moms, or two dads have to deal with people always asking them questions about their family. Like, "Why don't I ever see your mom, are your parents divorced?" Or where, "where is your dad, did he die?" But I never actually had to think about it, until a few days ago when I was asking some of my friends what it was like

to have people ask them about their parents. It never really dawned on me that my friends would have to deal with that because for me, it was never an issue, that's why I never thought about it.

Two of my most memorable experiences in BCC were the gay pride parade of 2003, and my very first memory of BCC. The gay pride parade was the first time that I had ever seen my principal outside of school. Not where I thought that I would see him, but there you go. I was drumming with Gay Gezunt on the BCC float and my mom pointed out into the crowd and said, "Look honey. It's your principal!" He was dancing in shorts and a tank top, and waving at my mom, then he saw me and quickly got behind some people. At first I had just waved, but when I saw that he was embarrassed to see me, it became awkward for me. At first it hadn't mattered to me, it was only after it mattered to him, that I got uncomfortable. My other memory was my first memory that I can remember. I was probably like three years old. I just remember looking up through the bottom of the ark and seeing the torah, then going back to sleep.

My life would not have been the same if I hadn't grown up in BCC. I would not have met some of my best friends, I would not have had all of those fun and meaningful memories, I would not have thought as much about Gay and Lesbian individuals, and I would not have been me. Thank you for not thinking you were Grasshoppers, I never did either.

If you feel small, that's who you will be.
Drash by Eli at IKAR, June 10

A few months ago when I was watching a movie with my friend, I thought it was such a great movie "That movie was terrible!" he said shortly after it ended. Isn't it interesting how two people can see exactly the same thing, but have two completely different points of view on it?

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What was different from Caleb and Joshua and the other ten spies? They both saw the same land, but came back with very different points of view.

Caleb and Joshua had a lot of faith. When they were scoping out the land of Canaan and they saw the huge, muscular inhabitants, they had faith that the Israelites could win even though the guys were big because they had faith in themselves that they could defeat the Canaanites, and even though the circumstances were bad, they still believed in themselves. They believed in G-d's promise to bring them to this land. It takes a lot of guts to stand up to three million stubborn Israelites and tell them to go into the land and fight the guys who are three times their size and five times stronger than them. Caleb and Joshua could have easily been killed on the spot by all the angry Israelites, but that didn't stop them from stating their opinion.

The others in contrast, did not have that kind of faith. "We appear to ourselves as grasshoppers, and so we appear to them", said the ten spies. What does that mean? If you feel small to yourself, then you will appear small in the eyes of others. When the ten spies saw the big muscular men, they probably felt very afraid and self-conscious.

What makes some people have faith in themselves and others not? For me, faith in myself comes from my family. Faith comes from family because family will give you compliments and constructive criticism on how you can improve what you are doing. Family also gives you a home and shelter, which makes you feel secure. Family gives you opportunities, like my trip to New Orleans.

In New Orleans, I helped tear down moldy buildings and rebuild them for people whose homes were destroyed in Hurricane Katrina. This was a very meaningful experience because I actually got to see what the people in New Orleans had to go through during the hurricane. It really made me think how lucky I am to have a family and a safe and comforting home.

But there are also other things that can give you faith in yourself

For my mitzvah project, I am buying complete skateboards for a skate park in Watts because I want to help kids learn how to believe in themselves by learning a new skill. I heard about this skate park from the Tony Hawk Foundation, which is building a skate park in Watts in an area called the Watts Labor Community Action Committee, which is an area that was totally destroyed in the aftermath of the “not guilty” verdict of the police handling of Rodney King. This area was rebuilt so that kids could have a safe place to play in a dangerous area. This entire seven-acre area is fenced so it’s safe. There are kids that go there at eight in the morning and leave at nine at night on non school days.

Every week since I was born my parents have been taking out a portion of all the money I have received over time from allowances and gifts specifically for my mitzvah project. I had a little bit over eighteen hundred dollars and spent it on buying complete skateboards for the kids in Watts that do not have enough money to buy themselves a skateboard of their own.

When I am skateboarding and focusing on doing a trick, I put everything out of my mind until I land that trick, and I also gain confidence and start to see myself as someone who can do amazing things, that is a gift that I want to give to other kids

What I learned from the ten spies is if you feel small, then you will be small. But if you can be like Caleb and Joshua and see yourself as strong, capable, and free, than that’s what you will be. Shabbat Shalom!