



## Hallah and Happiness • Parshat Sh'lach

On the precipice of entering the land of Canaan, Moses sends spies to scout out the terrain and its inhabitants. The strategy backfires as the mixed report from ten of the spies causes a panic. The repercussions were immediate and also reverberated throughout Jewish history. Instead of entering the Land, God condemns the generation to wander for forty years. They died in the desert, forever on the cusp of their destination.

Nahmanides locates their failure in one word, “*ephes*,” which inadequately translates as “but.” The spies claim that, “We came to the land that you sent us to, and it is indeed flowing with milk and with honey; and this is its fruit - *EPHES* – BUT the people who live in the land are fierce, and the cities are fortified and very large indeed. We even saw the descendants of giants there” (Num. 13:28). The “but” nullifies the positive framing in the first clause and emphasizes the daunting challenge ahead. The giants overshadow the prospective blessings.

The connotation of *ephes*, though, is even stronger than mere cancellation of potential. *Ephes* literally means zero or nothingness. Nahmanides writes, “But the wickedness of the spies consisted in saying the word *ephes*, which signifies something negative and beyond human capability, something impossible to achieve under any circumstances.” Their pessimism spreads like wildfire amongst the masses. When confronted with the responsibility of conquering the land and building a society, the Israelites retreated and entreated Moses to escape from that freedom.

Founder of the field of positive psychology, Dr. Martin Seligman, spent his entire career studying psychological agency. Agency has three components: (1) *efficacy* - the belief in one’s ability to exert effort towards achieving a goal; (2) *optimism* - the belief that the goal is achievable in the future; and (3) *imagination* - the goal requires envisioning a future when it is not necessarily presently apparent. In Seligman’s model, happiness and flourishing, the main emphases of positive psychology, are integrally related to human agency.

Seligman’s most recent project is placing agency within its historical context. He contends that when cultures believed in human agency progress followed. In contrast, when the predominant philosophy preached determinacy, societal stagnation ensued. In his article “Agency in Greco-Roman Philosophy,” Seligman traces the construct as it emerged in Homer’s *Odyssey*; it waxed in the writings of Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics, and then waned after the 4th century CE due to the deterministic writings of Augustine. Augustine’s influence on Christian theology, particularly as it relates to a removal of human agency correlates with, according to Seligman, the subsequent thousand years of the Dark Ages.

While God is all powerful in Jewish thought, Biblical and Rabbinic theology do not preach determinism. Human agency is a fundamental principle. Jewish philosophy manages to emphasize two sides of a competing dialectic: “All is foreseen, and permission is granted,” Rabbi

Akiva pithily summarizes in *Pirkei Avot*. God and humanity partner in advancing the world.

Emphasizing agency is the antidote to the attitude of the spies. This explains, writes Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, why the commandment of separating *hallah* is introduced in *Parshat Sh'lach*, whereas the other agricultural commandments are set forth in *Parshat Korach*. The latter laws are completely dependent on the land. Their obligation takes effect while the produce is still growing. In contrast, the obligation to separate *hallah* only takes effect once the dough is prepared. *Hallah* fuses reliance on God and human enterprise. The spies believed they were *ephes*, passive failures, incapable of settling the land. The message of *hallah* is that we are active agents, capable, with the help of God, of effecting change.

The precept of *hallah* also encourages optimism and imagination. The commandment was presented while the Israelites were in the desert. The prospect of kneading dough was a distant dream. The word used to introduce the concept is “*ve-haya*” – “and then it will be, that when you eat of the bread of the land, you shall offer up a gift to the Lord” (Num. 15:19). Foreshadowing the connection between Seligman’s work on agency and his foundational role in positive psychology, Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter, in his *Sefat Emet*, references a Midrash that the word *ve-haya* connotes happiness. Adding a spiritual twist to Seligman’s agency model, *hallah* signifies happiness because human initiative and industry is dedicated to God.

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**Character Challenge:** Choose a stretch goal that you have been avoiding due to lack of self-efficacy. Build your belief in your sense of agency, ask God for guidance, and optimistically endeavor to accomplish your objective.

**Quote from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt”l:** “One of the most remarkable features of Judaism – in this respect it is supreme among religious faiths – is its call to human responsibility. God wants us to fight our own battles. This is not abandonment. It does not mean – God forbid – that we are alone. God is with us whenever and wherever we are with him. “Yea, though I walk through the Valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.” What it means is that God calls on us to exercise those qualities – confidence, courage, choice, imagination, determination and will – which allow us to reach our full stature as beings in the image of God” (“The Turning Point,” *Covenant & Conversation*).