

This may be uncomfortable but do me a favor. Take a moment and think about the emotion of fear. Not just anxiety, but deep, cold, paralyzing fear. The kind of fear that whispers that you are small, that the challenges ahead are insurmountable, that your best efforts will fail. It's a primal human emotion. And, as we learn in this week's Torah portion and in our own experiences, fear is a profound emotion, with the power to shape the destiny of a people.

This week, we find ourselves at a crossroads of past, present, and future. We read Parashat *Sh'lach L'cha*, the story of the twelve spies, a narrative that highlights fear versus faith. Yesterday, we observed Juneteenth, a holiday whose very existence is a testament to a freedom delayed. And as we sit here today, we watch with heavy hearts as Israel confronts a modern-day giant—the terrorist regime in Iran—in a conflict that feels both frighteningly new and achingly old.

Three stories. Three sets of giants. And one central question: how do we respond when we feel like grasshoppers in a world of giants?

*Sh'lach L'cha* provides the blueprint for this entire emotional journey. At the edge of the Promised Land, Moses sends twelve leaders to scout the land. What should have been a mission of confirmation becomes a clear example of how terror can obscure faith. Ten spies return, and their report is one of terror. Yes, the land flows with milk and honey and they even carry back a cluster of grapes so large it takes two men, but that tangible proof of blessing is not their headline. The headline is the giants.

Separate from the cries of despair, two of the twelve spies stood out: Caleb and Joshua. They saw the same things but refused to be intimidated by others, urging the others to have faith. The people don't listen and cry out "We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are! We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we were the same in their eyes."

Notice the order. First, they felt like grasshoppers to *themselves*. Their own fear diminished them from the inside out. Only then did they project that feeling of smallness onto their enemies. This wasn't a military assessment; it was a crisis of their souls. As Rabbi Elliot Kukla explains, this is the "slave mentality" laid bare. After centuries in Egypt, "the people had left slavery but not psychological bondage – they were still thinking like slaves...."<sup>1</sup> They could see the fruit of freedom, literally hold its weight in their hands, but they could not imagine themselves worthy or strong enough to claim it. The result is a national fear that spreads through everyone – a fear of inadequacy, of not being able to reach what they were promised.

This painful gap between a promise made and a promise fulfilled isn't just an ancient one. We see it woven into the fabric of our own country's history with Juneteenth. For me, and maybe like many of you, this was not a historical moment I ever learned about growing up. On June 19th, 1865, Union soldiers finally notified the enslaved people of Galveston, Texas, that they were free—two and a half years after the Emancipation Proclamation. The celebration of Juneteenth was an act of emotional reclamation. It is a day to remember the bitterness of the delay of freedom, but more, to celebrate the resilience of the human spirit. It was a day to declare that they were not grasshoppers.

And today? The truth is, I don't really even need to tell you; we don't need to look at ancient texts or historical moments. We are living it. Fear pounded on the walls of our Jewish community yesterday when we received a credible threat. Everything fell silent as we closed buildings, shut down summer camp programming, and all institutions had extra security. That fear that I asked you to imagine at the beginning? For some of us, that fear was felt just yesterday.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/internal-amp-external-change/>

However, we didn't just batten down the hatches to give into fear. We protected ourselves. And the best part? We refused to be defined or seen as grasshoppers, especially by ourselves. As an entire Jewish community, we worked with the FBI, SAPD and our own security committees. You checked in on each other. We shared information. We chose solidarity over isolation. We chose courage over paralyzing fear. We chose to be Calebs and Joshuas here, in San Antonio, just yesterday.

To me, that overwhelming mix of vulnerability, fear, courage, and strength has been with me for some time, probably since October 7<sup>th</sup>, and probably even before that. It's why the stories in Israel resonate so deeply for me. When I check in with my friends there, they tell me of preparing their shelters for days on end, not just with food, but games and activities for their kids – and sometimes wine for the parents! They tell me about the terror of the sirens, the shockwaves they felt as the building down the block was hit, and the places they know and love being decimated in seconds. The emotional toll of this conflict is immense, and our hearts ache for all innocent civilians caught in the crossfire – in Israel, Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, Iran. When Israel acts to defend itself against the Islamic Republic of Iran, it is choosing the path of Caleb and Joshua, refusing to see itself as a grasshopper on a global stage.

Israeli strikes are targeting the command structure of a regime that has, since seizing power in 1979, sworn to wipe Israel off the map. When we speak of this, we must be precise: the target is not Iran, but the oppressive regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran. It is this regime that forced nearly 60,000 Jews to flee, that murders women like Mahsa Amini for showing a strand of hair, that funds terrorist networks, and executes dissenters without trial.

Incredibly, from within Iran itself, we hear echoes of that same resolve from people who have been stomped on like grasshopper for decades. NPR correspondent Jackie Northam recently interviewed Iranians who expressed hope at the regime being targeted, recognizing that Israel is specifically targeting their oppressors. One man's words were haunting: "I think this is the beginning of an end... This is going to make people more brave."<sup>2</sup> In the heart of oppression, a flicker of faith.

My focus, and our focus must be this: How do we move from fear to faith? How do we journey from being a grasshopper in our own eyes to standing tall? Rabbi Elliot Kukla, drawing on the writer William Bridges, distinguishes between *change* and *transition*. "Change is situational... Transition on the other hand is psychological. It is... the inner reorientation and self-redefinition that you have to go through in order to incorporate any of those changes into your life..."<sup>3</sup>

Leaving Egypt was a change. But the ten spies showed us that the Israelites had not yet made the *transition* to a free people. The Emancipation Proclamation was a change. Juneteenth marks the beginning of the long, ongoing *transition* toward true freedom. Our united response to the threats we face is how we begin our *transition* back to strength. The hope, for Jews, for Israelis, for the Iranian people, for the world, is for a *transition* to a future of security and peace.

So, how do we make that transition in our own lives? First, we must feel. We must allow ourselves to feel the frustrated loss of the spies, the joyful resilience of Juneteenth, and the complex mix of fear and resolve we experienced ourselves and that is felt by Israelis and freedom-seeking Iranians daily.

But then, we must act. We must choose to be Calebs and Joshuas. Commemorating Juneteenth is an act of faith—choosing to tell a story of liberation. Standing as a united San

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2025/06/15/nx-s1-5433664/iranians-react-to-israels-killing-of-its-top-leaders>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/internal-amp-external-change/>

Antonio Jewish community in the face of threats is an act of faith. Supporting Israel and the Iranian people as they confront their giant of the Islamic Republic of Iran is an act of faith—standing in solidarity and refusing to let anyone be seen as grasshoppers.

The ten spies saw only obstacles. Caleb and Joshua saw the promise. Juneteenth celebrates the arrival of a delayed promise. Our response yesterday is a reaffirmation of the promise of our community. The battle for Israel's and Iran's survival is a fight to secure their own promise. The choice is always the same. Do we allow our fears to define our reality, or do we allow our faith to forge a new one?

This Shabbat, let us hold all these stories, in all their emotional complexity, in our hearts. Let us weep for the promise delayed, celebrate the promise fulfilled, and pray for the strength and wisdom to secure the promise that is yet to come. Shabbat Shalom.