

TORAH SPARKS

THE ABSENT CALL

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 Dvar Parashah

The spy story ends at **Hormah**: וַיִּכּוּם וַיִּכְתּוּם עַד-הַחֲרָמָה, “they struck them, they crushed them, all the way to Hormah.” The name carries the word חרם, consecrated destruction, the very thing Israel was sent into the land to deliver. At Hormah it is delivered upon Israel. We who were **commanded** to commit חרם against the Canaanites are instead destroyed by them.

But it is not just the Canaanites who destroy us. At Hormah, we meet our destruction at the hand of Amalekites: וַיֵּרֵד הָעַמְלֵקִי וְהַכְּנַעֲנִי, “and the Amalekites and the Canaanites descended.” The Amalekites come down the mountain first. Amalek, our eternal enemy. Amalek, grandson of Esau.

Esau comes in a long line of rejected sons. He follows Cain, Ham, Ishmael. When Esau comes in from the field carrying the game his father asked for, the blessing is already gone. And Esau cannot accept it, cannot recognize his moment has passed. He **cries** out: בְּרַכְנִי גַם-אֲנִי אָבִי, “Bless me, also me, my father.” Centuries later Pharaoh stands in the wreckage of the tenth plague and **cries** it again: וַבְּרַכְתֶּם גַּם-אֶתִּי, “Bless me also.” We **listened** to those two cries side by side for Torah Sparks, Parashat Bo. The rejected one always arrives one scene too late. He performs every required act. He hunts, he cooks, he carries the dish to the tent. He finally recognizes God, agrees to let the Israelites go, and it is God who will harden his heart. And the inheritance turns out to be something deeds cannot capture. Birthright, blessing, land are bestowed. The hand that reaches for them after refusal closes on air.

In Parashat Sh'lach, Israel becomes that hand.

Twelve men go up to scout the land. Ten come back speaking דְּבַת הָאָרֶץ, bad reports of the land. This דבה is the **same word** that Joseph used against his brothers, the same bad report he brought back to his father of their activities herding sheep. An evil report, ten brothers, a family torn open. And ten brothers whom Joseph will later accuse of being spies. In our parashah, in this reflection of the Joseph story, we have ten tribes bringing back the bad report. And the two who stand apart are Caleb of the tribe of Judah and Joshua of the tribe of

Ephraim — Judah and Joseph, the two brothers who carried the future out of Genesis, carrying it again. The Joseph story is retold with the same two chosen and the same ten out of favor. And those ten seem to join the story of the fully rejected sons.

The death decree falls in מְדִבַּר פָּאֵרָן, the wilderness of Paran, Ishmael's wilderness, the ground where Abraham's first rejected son **settled** after his expulsion. The unchosen generation will live out its forty years on Ishmael's ground.

But they reject the rejection. They pull an Esau, a Pharaoh, a desperate bid to regain the status of the chosen one: וַיִּשְׁכְּמוּ בַבֶּקֶר, “and they rose early.”

In Genesis, early rising is the body language of **covenant**: וַיִּשְׁכֶם אַבְרָהָם בַּבֶּקֶר, “And Abraham rose early” to go to sacrifice Isaac. Jacob does the **same** to consecrate the stone at Beth El. The early riser answers God before the sun is fully up.

Our מעפילים, our defiant ascenders, know this choreography. They rise early, they climb, and they even say הִנְנּוּ, Abraham's word, the Akedah word, swollen into the plural, when they וַעֲלִינוּ, go up to the place, once again echoing the Akeda.

On the one hand, they refuse their death sentence. They pray with their feet. They reenact the Akedah step by step and climb the mountain hoping that this, too, is a test. That this time too a ram waits somewhere in the thicket, that the decree, like the knife, will be stayed at the last moment. The confession is real. The grief is real. The love of the land is real. But there is no ram. This is not the Akeda.

In the choreography of Genesis, הִנְנִי is an answer. God calls, and Abraham says: here I am. No one has called our מעפילים. Their הִנְנּוּ is a response without a summons, covenantal liturgy recited into silence. Moses names the silence to their faces: אַל-תַּעֲלוּ כִּי אֵין ה' בְּקִרְבְּכֶם: “Do not go up because God is not in your midst.” An Akedah no one commanded is a different deed with the same gestures. It is Esau's hunt.

The מעפילים believe they are Jacob. Jacob seized the heel in the womb, the birthright over lentils, the blessing taken in his brother's skins. The מעפילים too reach for the land. They too have the remains of a promise and work to realize it. But they have misread the story. Chosenness stood behind Jacob's grasping hand; the hand enacted a choice it did not make. Esau performed every act his father required and found that the inheritance had never been

the kind of thing acts could capture. Now his brother's children learn it on the mountain. They perform the choreography of chosenness after chosenness has left the stage.

Where they hoped for a ram, Amalek descends. Esau's grandson, pouring down the slope to strike and pursue and crush. They took Esau's part, and Esau's house rises to take Israel's: descending from the heights, dealing out the destruction, driving them to Hormah. Measure for measure, with genealogical precision.

One consolation remains: the fathers fall at Hormah but the children inherit the tent. And the children return. At Hormah, the next generation will have the **opportunity** to set things right. A Canaanite king attacks, Israel vows destruction with God's help, God listens, and the חרם flows in the other direction. The next generation is chosen. And that is the closest the desert generation gets to blessing.