

Yom Kippur Morning 5787 | September 21, 2026

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Grasshoppers and Giants

The bad report reached me an hour before Shabbat services on April 17th, the Sabbath bookended by *Yom HaShoah*, Holocaust Memorial Day, a few days before, and *Yom Ha-Atzma'ut*, Israel's Independence Day, just after.

That afternoon, posters advertising the Scarsdale High School Israeli Culture Club's *Yom Ha-Atzma'ut* celebration had been torn down and stuffed into urinals in boys' bathrooms where they were further desecrated. Images then circulated on social media, fueling an all-too-familiar cycle of mutually assured outrage.

And precisely because incidents like this have become all too familiar, we'd do well to give some thought to how we should respond. What would constitute the best possible *Jewish* response to such provocation?

Problems like the one I have described are not solvable with enhanced security measures. Just five weeks before the incident in our village, a jihadist sympathizer rammed his truck into a prominent Reform Temple in West Bloomfield, Michigan and stormed the building, rifle in hand. Only one person, the attacker, died that day. Temple Israel had drilled nightmare scenarios like this for years, as have many synagogues, including the one you're sitting in now.

But concrete barriers can't stop students from harassing other students. Guns and metal detectors have no effect against the spread of hate on social media. And lockdown drills won't teach basic empathy and respect.

There is Torah for every experience, and the Torah that came to mind in this instance comes from the Book of Numbers. The story goes like this. As the Israelites prepare to cross over the River Jordan and enter the promised land, twelve spies enter Canaan, one from each tribe, to scout out the territory and its inhabitants. After forty days they return and report that, as promised, the land flows with milk and honey; its fruit is lush and abundant. However, the inhabitants are powerful and their cities fortified. Breathlessly recounting their exploits to Moses

and Aaron, the spies bring back what the Torah calls “*dibat-ha’aretz ra’ah*” (Num. 14:37), “a bad report about the land,” and the rumors they spread became more extreme and grotesque in the retelling. “The land we traversed... devours its settlers,” they say. “We saw the *Nephilim* there,” they say, referring to a legendary race of giants. And then these damning words: “*We looked like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and so we must have appeared to them*” (Num. 13:33).

The Israelites, hearing the bad report, weep inconsolably. They turn against Moses and Aaron, begging to return to Egypt, cursing their leaders and the God who delivered them from slavery only to meet an untimely end in the jaws of giants.

God punishes the faithless spies, and all whose hearts turned against entering the promised land, with a self-fulfilling prophecy: They will not in fact enter Canaan but wander forty years – one year for each day that the spies scouted the land – until their “carcasses drop in the wilderness,” as the curse is memorably preserved (Num. 14:32).

I first learned this story from Professor Julius Lester. As a student at Amherst I occasionally attended Hillel services down

the road at UMass where Lester, then faculty in the Judaic Studies department, regularly served as a lay *chazzan*. He would *daven* the prayers in a baritone rich with gospel flavor.

In the 60's, Julius Lester had been a folk singer and activist inside the Black Power movement. His first book, published in 1968, was called *Look Out, Whitey! Black Power's Gon' Get Your Mama!* He was a gifted writer, a radio show host, a guitar and banjo player, and a man who had once been accused, publicly and painfully, of antisemitism.

An encounter with Rabbi Yechiael Lander, who would eventually be my Hillel rabbi up the road, changed the course of Lester's life. They began to meet regularly for coffee and conversation. Lester shared that at the age of seven, he learned that his maternal great-grandfather, Adolph Altschul, was a Jewish immigrant from Germany, who married a freed slave.

In 1982, with Rabbi Lander presiding, Lester converted to Judaism.

Many years later, I learned from him this Torah about the spies who are suffering from a bad case of what Lester called

“grasshopper syndrome.” “It seems axiomatic,” he said, “that how we see ourselves determines how we see others. If I am a grasshopper to myself, then others will appear as giants to me.”

“Frequently,” he noted, “Jews see themselves as grasshoppers and thereby transform ‘*goyim*’ [his word, not mine] into giants.”

“Psychologically,” he continued, “how much of contemporary black anti-Semitism is nothing more than blacks seeing themselves as grasshoppers and making giants out of Jews?” (Lester, “Seeing Ourselves as Grasshoppers,” National Havurah Committee, 1989).

Six years after his conversion to Judaism, Lester’s public criticism of black antisemitism led to a painful rupture with his colleagues in the Afro-American Studies Department. The Department of Judaic Studies took him in.

Lester had the courage to turn the question on his own community of origin. Yom Kippur demands we do the same. How much of what we Jews face today is a confrontation with actual giants, and how much is grasshopper syndrome, making giants out of others?

Jewish tradition gives us a useful scale for calibrating our response to provocation. On one side of the scale, we can respond with *din*, the Hebrew word meaning justice. To respond with *din* in a court setting means that discipline is not withheld from those who deserve it, and that the punishment fits the crime. Justice is served. On the other side of the scale, Jewish tradition places *rachamim* which means compassion – the ability to respond with mercy, recognizing that even wrongdoers must nevertheless be regarded as human beings with human limitations and human failings.

Even God, the Talmud tells us – and this is one of those quintessential Yom Kippur teachings – wrestles with which impulse to follow in response to our transgressions. The Talmud asks, with fantastic audacity, “When God prays, what does God pray?” The answer the Rabbis give:

May it be My will that My mercy will overcome My anger...

May I conduct myself toward My children... with the quality of rachamim, and may I approach them in a

way that goes beyond the letter of the law (Bavli, Berakhot 7a).

Jewish tradition never casts aside the need for *din*, justice. But if God's own prayer is a plea to temper anger with compassion, it is surely our obligation as well. Although, let's admit it: it's hard to summon *rachamim* when we are provoked.

When I heard that bad report from Scarsdale High School, I understood our community's rage because I felt it too. But the Talmud imagines God taking a breath before acting. In this case, productive conversations already underway with the school board, administration, village leadership, and community-at-large had to compete with threats of lawsuits, demands for resignations, and public shaming of family members implicated in the affair. Such responses, I fear, display *din* without *rachamim*. They risk turning a legitimate demand for accountability into a counterproductive cycle that diminishes us.

In all this I heard an echo of the spies' lament: "*We looked like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and so we must have appeared to them.*"

Are we facing giants, or are we making them?

The question becomes harder, and more urgent, as we move from Scarsdale to New York, from a high school bathroom to City Hall. There, a new mayor has made relentless hostility to Israel a signature of his public voice. And he is not alone. This summer's Senate primary in Michigan suggests a rising generation of political figures singularly fixated on the Jewish State: the one country whose very legitimacy is treated as an open question.

The concern is real. I share it. You don't need me to catalog it from the *bimah*; many of you carried it into this room today.

And still, on this day of *self*-examination, we should ask: Is the mayor a giant, or have we made him one?

The coming years will turn on our answer. This moment demands the discipline to discern a threat from a provocation, an armed terrorist from a rhetorical flamethrower.

That discipline is not only a public responsibility. It is a profoundly personal one. Every person in this room understands "grasshopper syndrome" because at one time or

another every one of us has experienced it. It's not just a Jewish communal pathology. It's a human tendency.

Even Moses speaks about himself as incapable of the very thing God calls him to do.

"I am not a man of words" (Ex. 4:10).

"I am slow of speech, slow of tongue" (*Ibid*).

"Who am I to go to Pharaoh?" (Ex. 3:11).

"Please, send somebody else" (Ex. 4:13).

Notice what the Torah says and what it does not say. The Pharaoh is real. The Pharaoh is powerful. The Pharaoh held the life or death of his subjects in his hand. It also doesn't say that Moses's speech impediment isn't real. The point is not merely that Moses is afraid; who wouldn't be? The point is that he seems to have constructed an entire identity out of his deficiency: *I am not someone who can do this*.

And yet the man who said, "I am not a man of words" ends his life giving the longest and most eloquent speech in all of Torah, the Book of Deuteronomy, whose Hebrew name – *Devarim* – simply means, "words." Moses overcame his grasshopper

syndrome to emerge our greatest leader, the man whose words would change the world.

We live in a world full of Pharaohs. They are real. They are powerful. If you feel adrift in a world that reels all around you, you are not alone. But the catastrophic conclusions we make about ourselves, our own capacity, our own agency, too often become self-fulfilling. *I lost my job becomes I am unemployable. I feel alone in my marriage becomes I am unlovable. I failed at something becomes I am a failure.*

Johannes Brahms destroyed so much of the music he composed as a young man that scholars estimate he burned more of his manuscripts than he ever allowed to be published. Twenty string quartets went up in flames before he published his Opus 51. Explaining why it took him over twenty years to complete a first symphony, he said, of composing in Beethoven's shadow, *"You have no idea how it feels to hear behind you the tramp of such a giant."*

There's the pain we inflict on ourselves, knowingly or not; there's also the pain life inflicts on us. The call from the doctor that changes everything, even how time is measured: no longer month to month, year to year, planning the vacation, but day to

day, minute to minute, waiting for test results. It's all real; it's all hard; and the question that matters is this: how can we remain the authors of our lives and not just characters in a narrative we did not write?

Yom Kippur reminds us that agency remains even when circumstances are beyond our control.

For, yes, on the one hand, it says:

בְּרֹאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה יִכְתְּבוּן, וּבְיוֹם צוֹם כְּפוּר יִחְתְּמוּ...
מִי יַחְיֶה וּמִי יָמוּת....

*On Rosh HaShanah, it is written; on Yom Kippur, it is sealed –
...who shall live and who shall die (“Unetaneh Tokef,” Machzor).*

Written. Sealed. Life. Death. It sounds like a fixed decree.

But if that were truly the case, we'd read the decree on Yom Kippur morning, and go home to weep, because where is the agency in a fixed decree? How do we write our own story when the book is already written?

But the book *isn't* already written, and that's the whole point of Yom Kippur.

The spies heard factual data and forged it into a fixed decree. *We looked like grasshoppers in our own eyes.* Their takeaway: *I am not someone who can do this.*

God responded to their grasshopper syndrome in kind: *With an outlook like that, you can never enter the promised land.* The *Mishnah* refers to the punishment as a **decree**: נִגְזַר עַל אֲבוֹתֵינוּ – *It was decreed upon our ancestors that they would not enter the land* (M. Ta'anit 4:6).

But Yom Kippur insists the decree is *not* fixed, *not* sealed, that ***teshuvah, tefillah, tzedakah ma'avirin et ro'a ha-g'zeirah,*** that our *teshuvah* – the re-aiming of our gaze, our *tefillah* – our sincere reflection and spiritual intention, and our *tzedakah* – our righteous and empathic action – that all these, together, can temper the harshness of any would-be decree. It is not forever fixed. We are still fixing it.

Our story has an epilogue. Two spies, it so happens, broke ranks. Caleb and Joshua received the same data about the land

but did not lie down inside a decree. “Caleb hushed the people before Moses and said, ‘*Aloh na’aleh!* Let us by all means go up, and we shall gain possession of it, for,” as it says in Hebrew, “*yachol nuchal lah*,” “we can, for sure, do this” (Num. 13:30).

Caleb is the hero this moment needs. By refusing to turn a report into a decree, he went forward. In the face of giants, Caleb stood firm.

People convinced of their own essential smallness will cower, lash out, fail to act from a posture of self-confident dignity.

Caleb’s assertion, “*we can, for sure, do this*,” isn’t bravado. It’s hard-won self-confidence. It’s the stance of someone who has accepted the tough reality of the situation and has *also* internalized God’s charge to the Jewish people: to enter the land promised on oath to our ancestors, to claim our destiny.

Caleb is a hero, but he’s not a superhero. When God explains why Caleb, of all that generation, will enter the land, God names one thing: רוּחַ אַחֵרֶת עִמּוֹ – “a different spirit was with him” (Num. 14:24).

That's all. Caleb had a different *ruach*, a different spirit: a different way of looking at things, or, more to the point, a different way of looking at *himself*. His fellow spies looked in the mirror and saw grasshoppers. Caleb saw a leader. Caleb saw a human being, a Jew, no less, fully capable of overcoming the obstacles ahead, relying, above all, on a pure heart, a willing spirit, and his trust in God's promise. And so he said: "*Aloh na'aleh* – Let's do this. Let us by all means go up."

What would "going up" look like for us, this new year?

It would begin on the inside. With a mindset. A stance. A posture of self-confident Jewish dignity. It would look like showing up for your Jewish community, your WRT family, because we're all in this together. It would mean asking not, "*What are they doing to us?*" but rather, "*What am I building?*"

Wear that Star of David near your heart – it's called a *Magen David*, a Shield of David! – a reminder of your resolve. Run for the school board instead of berating it. Fund the institutions that will outlast the provocation. Buy the cookies for the Israeli Culture Club's next event. Small acts that will register as major empowerments – both in here, and out there.

The next provocation that comes to our community will be our proving-ground. When it comes – and it will come – I hope you'll remember Professor Lester, and ask yourself: *"Will I answer as a grasshopper or with a different spirit?"*

Let's do this. Let's go up.

G'mar Chatimah Tovah: May God seal us in the Book of Life — not as passive characters, but as partners in writing what comes next.