



Jewish Community Center of Paramus
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A Shabbat Message from Rabbi Arthur Weiner

Friday June 12, 2026 ~ Parsha: Shelach Lecha

Dear JCCP/CBT family,

There Was Room Under the Tent

This week, I found myself thinking about a tragic story that recently concluded in a Texas courtroom. For those unfamiliar with the case, a brief summary can be found [here](#).

Last April, at a high school track meet, a severe storm forced hundreds of students to seek shelter from the rain. A seventeen-year-old student found his way to a tent that belonged to another school. What began as a dispute over space escalated into an argument. The argument became a confrontation. The confrontation became violent. One teenager shoved a student. The other responded by pulling out a knife and stabbing him in the chest. A young man lost his life. Another young man was recently sentenced to decades in prison.

As is often the case in America, the story quickly became entangled in debates about race, politics, self-defense, and social justice. Commentators rushed to fit the tragedy into familiar ideological categories. Yet before any of those larger questions, I found myself troubled by something much simpler.

A teenager was seeking shelter in a storm. And a group of other teenagers apparently decided there was no room for him.

It would also be dishonest to discuss this tragedy without acknowledging the role race played in how so many Americans perceived it.

The young man who died was white. The young man convicted of killing him is Black. Almost immediately, people rushed to interpret the event through a racial transforming the two teenagers into symbols in a much larger national argument.

Perhaps that was inevitable. America carries a long and painful history of racism, and no one should pretend otherwise. Our history is real. The wounds are real. The suspicions and fears that sometimes linger between communities are real as well.

As I followed this story, I found myself saddened by another realization. Despite all the progress our society has made over the last 60 years, we still live in a country where almost any interaction between a Black person and a white person carries the possibility that race will become part of the story. Sometimes that is because genuine prejudice exists. Sometimes it is because people bring different experiences and assumptions to the same event. Sometimes it is because outside observers impose their own narratives upon a tragedy. Whatever the reason, it is a reminder that the work of building trust, understanding, and human dignity is not finished.

As Jews, we understand that two truths can exist at the same time. We can acknowledge the continuing reality of racism in American life while also insisting that every human being is more than a racial category, a political symbol, or a headline. At some point, before they became symbols in a national debate, these were simply two teenagers standing in the rain. One is now dead. The other will spend much of his adult life behind bars. Whatever larger social questions this case raises, that human tragedy should remain at the center of the story.

To be absolutely clear: nothing about the failure of hospitality excuses what followed. A disagreement over a tent can never justify an act of lethal violence. A young life was taken, another life was effectively ruined, and two families will carry this pain forever. As I reflected on this story, I found myself drawn to this week's Torah portion, *Shelach Lecha*. The most well-known part of *Shelach Lecha* is the story of the spies. Twelve leaders, the finest young men in their tribes, men of renown and achievement, are sent to scout the Land of Israel. They return carrying evidence of the land's abundance, yet ten of them allow fear to overwhelm their judgment. They see fortified cities and powerful inhabitants and conclude that the Israelites cannot succeed. Their fear spreads throughout the camp, leading to one of the greatest national tragedies in the Torah.

What is fascinating is how the Torah portion concludes. Immediately after the story of the spies, seemingly out of nowhere, comes the commandment of *tzitzit* (fringes):

"And you shall look upon it and remember all the commandments of the Lord."

The Torah then adds:

"And you shall not stray after your hearts and after your eyes."

The connection is deeper than it first appears.

The spies were sent ***latur** et ha'aretz*, to scout the land.

The commandment of *tzitzit* concludes with the warning *v'lo **taturu*** do not go scouting after your hearts and your eyes.

The same Hebrew root appears in both passages. With this, we see that the Torah is deliberately connecting the two seemingly disparate stories.

The spies saw something real. The cities were fortified. The inhabitants were strong. But they allowed fear, emotion, and impulse to determine how they interpreted what they saw. That mistake condemned an entire generation to wander in the wilderness for forty years.

The commandment of *tzitzit* teaches the opposite lesson. Instead of rash and emotional judgements, this mitzvah instead demands that we:

Pause.

Look again.

Remember who we are.

Remember our values.

Think before we act.

The purpose of mitzvot is not merely ritual observance. The purpose of mitzvot is to place a sacred pause between stimulus and response.

Over the years, I have tried to teach our community that *teshuvah* (repentance) is one of Judaism's greatest gifts. Yet at the same time, *teshuvah* cannot fix everything. A sincere apology can heal relationships. Genuine repentance can transform a person. A life can be redirected toward goodness. But some mistakes have consequences that cannot be reversed.

Teshuvah cannot restore a life that has been taken. It cannot erase trauma. It cannot turn back the clock. That is why the Torah places such emphasis on wisdom, restraint, and judgment before we act.

Perhaps that is the deeper lesson of both the spies and the *tzitzit*. Before fear takes hold. Before anger takes over. Before impulse becomes action.

Pause.

Look again.

Remember who you are.

Because some decisions shape the course of an entire lifetime.

Our Rabbis taught that among the miracles of Jerusalem was that despite the crowds that gathered for the holidays, no person ever said, "There is no room for me to lodge in Jerusalem." (Avot 5:5)

This week, I found myself wondering how different things might have been if someone had simply said, "There is room for you under our tent."

As I think about this tragic story, I find myself returning to a simple image: a group of teenagers standing together in the rain.

What would have happened if someone had simply made room?

What would have happened if someone had said, "Come stand with us?"

We will never know. But what we do know is that sometimes a single act of kindness can change a life.

And sometimes the absence of that kindness can change many lives forever.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Arthur Weiner