

NEW JERSEY ROCKLAND

# Jewish Standard

## Shelach: We are well able

### In memory of Rabbi Jehiel Orenstein

\_JStandardRabbi Debra Orenstein |

*Published: 30 May 2013*

I set my alarm to wake up early and write this Torah column. Then I got a call that woke me earlier still with the news that my father had just died. In that moment, everything changed for me, including the Torah portion.

Obviously, the chapters and verses did not change. But the meaning changed, as it should. Jews live simultaneously in three cycles: the holiday cycle, the Torah reading cycle, and the personal lifecycle. All three influence and comment on one another.

If you have a baby during Passover, then the holiday and that child are forever linked — and not just because of the flourless birthday cakes. Your child may “own” the ma nishtana with a special sense of pride, or collect toy lambs, or repeatedly hear that it was the horseradish (bitterness) which put his mother into labor (life). If your sister died around Tu Bishvat (the New Year for Trees), both the shoveling and the planting may reverberate in a unique way. The Torah reading changes on — and in advance of — certain holidays. Even when it doesn’t change, the linkage is felt: reading about the renewal and universality of the covenant in parashat Nitzavim each year on the week before Rosh Hashanah puts us in just the right frame of mind for the New Year.

Such connections aren’t just made retrospectively. We can cultivate them. If you are scheduled for a biopsy, you can look to the Torah reading or upcoming holiday to sustain and inspire you. If you have chosen a wedding date based on the convenience of far-flung relatives, delve into that week’s Torah portion with your intended, and you are sure to find both romance and valuable instruction.

My father died on the day that I was slated to write about Shelach, which includes the story of twelve tribal leaders, ten of whom come back from the Land of Israel with what is usually labeled a “bad report.” The truth is: the report is good. Those ten spies agree with Joshua and Caleb, the two spies with a positive attitude, that the Land is flowing with milk and honey and has astonishingly large and rich produce. They simply don’t trust God’s promise that they will be able to own the land. They are overwhelmed by the fortifications of the cities and the stature of the people there, who appear to them to be superhuman. “We were like grasshoppers in our own eyes,” they say, and further project: “and so we were in their eyes.”

After my father’s death, I thought of the other “Promised Land” whose quality is not in dispute: the World to Come. Like the Land of Israel, it was promised to us. Yet we doubt it. The obstacles to owning a place in the World to Come seem more formidable than any earthly conquest. It is tempting to relinquish responsibility, along with hope, protesting that “we seem like grasshoppers in our own eyes — and in the eyes of the Court above also.”

But there are those rare people — an even 16.67% of the population or 2 out of 12 — who keep their eyes on the promise, more than on the problems. My father was of that number. Even when he was paralyzed with ALS, he never let his disabilities stop him from doing what he was able to do. Like Caleb, he said, “We are well able.” Long before he was ill, he directed his thoughts more to God’s greatness than to his own failings. As a result, he was one of the best and one of the happiest people I have known.

When my father realized that someone was feeling “like a grasshopper,” he would often quote the words that the prophet Samuel spoke to Saul, the first king of Israel (I Samuel 15:17): “You may be small in your own eyes, but are you not the head of the tribes of Israel?” There is no king in Israel, and tribes are lost to us. But we still have leaders. We still are leaders. In different times and ways, each of us is called upon to be a scout and explorer of the future and to lead the way there, despite fears and obstacles. Like our ancestors, we are “well able” to live up to the promise and the tasks that have been entrusted to us. The question is: will we?

In the way he lived and died, my father led the way to the World to Come. He loved life and wanted to live, but he was not afraid to die. He trusted God to help him overcome, even when he didn’t see how the forces mobilized against him could be vanquished. May his example inspire us to face life and death with courage.

You can learn more about Rabbi Jehiel Orenstein at [jehielorensteininspires.com](http://jehielorensteininspires.com)