

## Summer Vacation: An Educational Challenge

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In Parshat Shlach, the final *parshat shavua* read before high school students in Israel begin their summer vacation, Hashem commands Moshe, "*shlach l'cha*":

**"Send out for yourself** men, and they will scout the Land..." (Bamidbar 13:2)

Since *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* is omniscient, He knows what will happen. Moshe, in contrast, does not. As far as he is concerned, he is simply sending men to bring signs of the Land's goodness to the people. Moshe clearly envisions that the men will stand before the nation upon their return and praise the Promised Land. Not only will Moshe, as Hashem's emissary, speak in this way to the people, but the spies will also add their influential, worthy, and independent voices to the "campaign" for *Eretz Yisrael*. However, something goes wrong. The spies do not meet Moshe's expectations. Instead, these men – the leaders of that generation – slander the Land rather than extol its virtues.

When I consider this episode, I wonder: What does Moshe really expect? What is he thinking? After all, at Hashem's command, he sends strong, independent, and intelligent men on the mission. Furthermore, the Torah does not state that they receive explicit orders in this regard. It is as if they are supposed to realize on their own that they must view the Land favorably. They are not instructed to close their eyes to the challenges, doubts, concerns, and fears or to report only on the positive.

In essence, this is the dilemma: You send men on your behalf, and you expect them to remain faithful to you and your path at all costs. You assume that they will continue to cling to you – even when you no longer have any control over them, their words, or their actions.

Every parent and educator experiences this. At a certain stage – after all the lessons about Torah and values, after the never-ending study, after the incessant discussions and the daily drills – we expect that the time has come for "*shlach l'cha*," to send our child out. And we take it for granted that he will go where and how we send him. He will go to school and not embarrass us. He will go on vacation and behave precisely as he was taught. He will meet new people, but he will know how to choose his friends, his place, and his actions – as we want him to. He will turn eighteen and go exactly where we believe is most appropriate for him. However, although our expectations are clear, life does not always play along. Former kibbutz members – at least the older ones – recall how they were nearly ostracized when they decided to leave the kibbutz. People from previous generations tell how their families gave them a very hard time when they wished to marry someone from a different Jewish ethnic background. And let us not forget the boy who became an artist - even though his mother dreamed that he would become a lawyer - or the girl who put her career before starting a family "at the proper time." Many people try to forget how hurt and disappointed their parents and teachers were when their offspring chose a different path.



Our teenagers are about to begin their summer vacations. For us, this serves as practice – as a small-scale “*shlach l’cha*.” Parents, teachers, rabbis, and educators repeatedly remind the kids that they are expected to take care of themselves, to make good choices, and to toe the line. Some even attempt to create alternate frameworks for their vacation. And they have a point. Without supervision, our vulnerable teens are at risk. Indeed, we cannot ignore the fact that sending our kids out can be dangerous. They may make bad choices. They may stumble and fail; they may choose friends we do not like, find themselves in conditions we never imagined, suffer addictions and make other fateful and serious mistakes.

Nevertheless, *Parshat Shlach* has a valuable lesson for Moshe and for all of us - as human beings and as parents, as educators and as leaders. During the episode of the spies, Moshe loses his innocence, and that is a good thing. Perhaps *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* specifically wants the Jewish people’s greatest leader to be formed and forged by this type of experience. Moshe learns that not every expectation will come to fruition, and that in spite of all our hard work – planting, watering, fertilizing – at the end of the day, we just have to close our eyes, pray...and send them out.

Thus, “*shlach l’cha*” is not only the most dangerous thing we can do, it is also the best thing we can do. It means giving our loved ones the chance to make a choice – for good or for bad – and nothing is better than that. For if we try and take away their power to choose - if we do not recognize their inherent need to make those choices - we will lose them anyway.

Therefore, in the near – and not-so-near – future, when we practice doing “*shlach l’cha*” with our children and students, we must not forget to share this with them, to talk to them, and to ensure that they understand our intentions, our expectations, and our concerns.

And then, in the end, the only thing left for us to do is to hope and pray that their choices will be successful, correct, and not too far off from what we expected.

#### **Educational Reflections from Rav Yona Goodman**

1. *Many educators and parents worry about summer vacation and its accompanying dangers. According to Teresa, how should we view summer vacation?*
2. *Many believe that a jam-packed schedule can reduce the risks inherent in the lack of structure of the summer break. Does Teresa’s article contradict this approach? Is she suggesting that we deliberately ensure that our children have plenty of unstructured free time?*
3. *In light of Teresa’s thought-provoking words, are there any practical implications to the way we prepare our young people for vacation?*
4. *Teresa recommends that we do not “forget to share this with them, to talk to them, and to ensure that they understand.” What does she mean? What exactly should we be saying?*