



THE SHALOM BAYIT JOURNAL



Parashat Shelach

The Danger of Negative Labels

Understanding the Torah and the Human Experience

One of the most powerful tendencies of the human mind is its ability to create labels. Labels help us make sense of the world by allowing us to quickly interpret people, situations, and experiences. But once we attach a label to someone, we often begin seeing everything they do through that lens.

Psychologists have long observed that our expectations shape our perceptions. Once we decide someone is selfish, critical, uncaring, or controlling, our minds naturally begin collecting evidence to support that conclusion. Even genuine acts of kindness can be dismissed because they no longer fit the story we have already created.

One of the striking patterns throughout Yetziat Mitzrayim is how often Bnei Yisrael misinterpret Hashem's intentions.

When Moshe first arrives with the promise of redemption, they fear things will only become more difficult. At the Sea, they cry out, "Were there no graves in Egypt that you brought us here to die?" (Shemot 14:11).

Later they complain that Hashem took them into the desert to starve them. When water becomes scarce, they assume they have been abandoned. Again and again, they interpret difficult circumstances as evidence that Hashem wishes to harm them.

Instead of seeing Hashem as a loving and caring Father guiding them toward freedom, they begin to see Him as a force that wishes to punish them, starve them, abandon them, or destroy them.

Once that label is in place, every new experience is interpreted through it.

The Midrash explains that when the spies entered the Land, Hashem caused the inhabitants to become occupied with funerals, allowing the spies to move throughout the Land unnoticed (Rashi to Bamidbar 13:32).

Hashem was performing a kindness. Yet when the spies returned, they interpreted the very same event differently. Instead of seeing Divine protection, they concluded that the Land was dangerous and destructive: "It is a land that consumes its inhabitants."

The event did not change. Only the interpretation did. Once a negative label exists, even goodness becomes difficult to recognize.





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Relationships face the same challenge. When a husband or wife begins to view their spouse through a negative label, that label starts to shape every interaction. A forgotten errand or misunderstanding is no longer simply a mistake. It becomes proof. Even sincere efforts to improve are often dismissed because the label has already determined the conclusion.

*Negative labels prevent us
from seeing reality clearly*

When we stop seeing a person as a complex human being capable of growth and change, we stop being curious. We stop being compassionate. We stop noticing the good. Instead, we see only what confirms the story we have already decided is true.

Healthy relationships require the humility to ask, "Is there another way to understand what I am seeing?" They require us to challenge the labels we have created and remain open to the possibility that the person standing before us is more than our assumptions about them.

Throughout the Exodus narrative, Hashem demonstrates that He is not the God Bnei Yisrael feared. He is leading them, feeding them, protecting them, and preparing them for something greater.

The tragedy is that their fear often prevented them from recognizing the good that was already there. Sometimes the greatest obstacle to connection is not what our spouse is doing. It is the label we have attached to them.



About The Shalom Bayit Journal

The Shalom Bayit Journal explores the intersection of Torah, psychology, relationships, and the human experience. Through thoughtful essays and practical reflection, the Journal seeks to make timeless wisdom meaningful and accessible for everyday life.

