



**Shabbat Shelach Lecha**  
**Rabbi Tirzah Ben David**  
**Sermon: June 2010**

## **The Limits of Daring**

There are some stories that never die, and the Hebrew Bible has more than its fair share of them. The Torah is our great law book and ethical guide, but it's also our great story book, and the map of our destiny. And without the Promised Land there is no destiny. The Patriarchs wandering quite benignly around Canaan are fascinating, but they're not heroic; the shift comes with the Exodus from Egypt, and culminates with the conquest of Canaan under Joshua. The refugees have turned into warriors, and their watchword is: "Be strong and of good courage". And it's stirring stuff.

But there is a problem with turning your national epic into scripture. Because the values embodied in the heroic ideal are fairly limited, mostly revolving around personal courage and daring in battle, and of course the belief that God – or the Gods – are on your side. It's an ideal defined by conflict, by warfare.

It struck me that there is an interesting parallel here with the ancient Greeks, and another heroic story that has never died: the fall of Troy.

If they have any historical reality, then the Exodus from Egypt and the conquest of Canaan, probably happened at about the same time as the Trojan War – circa 1250 BCE, and both generated a great national epic, one distilled into the Pentateuch and the Book of Joshua, and the other into the great Homeric poem of the Iliad. But Homer remained secular: the Greeks of today do not (fortunately) lay claim to a chunk of western Turkey because they won the Trojan War 3,500 years ago. The Greeks had the Gods, who they eventually outgrew; anyone can read about the fall of Troy (or see the film) without feeling obliged to take a personal moral stand about it. We Jews, on the other hand, didn't have the Gods: we had God, who has stayed with us, who has grown up alongside us - or not, sometimes, perhaps...

However hard we try to plaster over it, there is a serious dis-junction between the claims of our history and the claims upon our Western moral conscience, which tells us that it's wrong to take what you want at other people's expense. And of course that moral conscience itself derives from the same source - the Torah. "Thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not murder, thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" obviously doesn't apply if your neighbour is a Canaanite, or a Hittite or an Amorite. Or does it?

This is the dilemma that modern Israel still struggles with on a daily basis.

The heroic ideal of Joshua, of the Maccabees, has won us great victories; Calev would be proud of us; sometimes the world has been proud of us too. The Six Day War, the raid on Entebbe; iconic moments when audacity, daring – chutzpa: we invented it - gave us victory against all the odds.

But there are limits to daring; the higher the stakes the greater the potential for disaster; Get it right and you're a hero. But if it blows up in your face, you're on your own: no one will weep for you. And you can never know in advance which it's going to be.