

### Potomac Torah Study Center

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Rosh Hodesh Tammuz is Sunday evening through Tuesday

**NOTE: Devrei Torah presented weekly in Loving Memory of Rabbi Leonard S. Cahan z"l, Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation Har Shalom, who started me on my road to learning more than 50 years ago and was our family Rebbe and close friend until his untimely death.**

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**Devrei Torah are now Available for Download (normally by noon on Fridays) at [www.PotomacTorah.org](http://www.PotomacTorah.org). Thanks to Bill Landau for hosting the Devrei Torah archives.**

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**May Hashem protect Israel and Jews everywhere. May Hashem's protection shine on all of Israel, the IDF, and Jews throughout the world. We mourn those of our people who have perished since attacks have resumed. May the IDF and the U.S. soon force Iran to seek peace, and may a new era bring security and rebuilding for both Israel and all others who genuinely seek peace.**

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As I have indicated the past few weeks, Miriam's tzaraat, Korach's rebellion, and the departure of the Meraglim all take place the same week, between 22 and 29 Sivan in the year 2449 (second year after the Exodus). The proof of the timing is in the *Torah Anthology*, vol. 13, pp. 333-35. Rabbi Yitzchok Magriso, an 18<sup>th</sup> Century author from Constantinople, studied and put together information from several sections in the Torah to demonstrate this timing. Why then did the Torah place Shelach before Korach? The answer, in the same source, is to tie the stories thematically. Miriam's tzaraat is a result of Lashon Horah. The Meraglim return and speak Lashon Horah about the land of Israel, falsely claiming that the residents are giants and that the land eats its inhabitants. Shelach concludes with the mitzvah of tzitzit, and Korach uses the blue die of one string of the tzitzit as the basis of his question to Moshe whether an all blue garment also requires tzitzit.

Moshe sends leaders of the twelve tribes on a diplomatic investigation of the land of Israel. The men, all leaders of their tribes, spend forty days openly touring the land and bringing back souvenirs. These leaders of the generation of the Exodus are not spies. They interact openly with the people for more than seven weeks – their position as leaders of B'Nai Yisrael is apparent to the people of Canaan. Moshe obviously fears sending these men and what they will report back to the people. He takes one precaution, changing the name of Hosea bin Nun to Yehoshua – adding a yud (for Hashem) to the beginning of his name – so Yehoshua's name would start with yud-hey (Hashem's name).

Rabbi David Fohrman and his scholars at [alephbeta.org](http://alephbeta.org) focus on connections between the story of the Meraglim and other stories in the Torah. One obvious connection is with the first war of B'Nai Yisrael, immediately after crossing the Sea of Reeds. Amalek attacks the Jews, focusing on the weakest members of the group, those at the back who have the most difficulty keeping up with the journey. Moshe has Hoshea select a group of men to do the fighting. Whenever Moshe has his arms raised, pointing toward the sky (Hashem), the Jews push back Amalek. Whenever Moshe's arms point down, Amalek pushes back the Jews. This pattern is an obvious signal that the Jews, until a few days earlier slaves for generations, have no training in fighting and could not defeat an experienced enemy army on their own. The former slaves are not doing the fighting – we only defeat Amalek because God fights on our side. Hashem expects the Jews entering the land to remember the battle with Amalek (who live in the south of Canaan) and know that God will fight for B'Nai Yisrael. When the majority report of the Meraglim focus on the "giants" in the land and say that B'Nai Yisrael could not defeat them, Moshe and Hashem are both furious, because the Jews should know that God fights with them against Amalek and other enemies.

One key question Moshe has for his diplomatic delegation is whether the land is good. When the majority report comes back that the land eats (kills) the people, Moshe and Hashem are furious. God has been promising the Jews since the

days of Avraham Avinu that He would give Avraham's descendants a special land and that the land, full of milk and honey, is a very good land. In giving their report, the majority do not say that the land is good – they focus on the problems we would have defeating the Canaanites. Rabbi Natanel Kaszovitz (Auckland, NZ) seconds the conclusion that the land is very, very good – because it is our home, Hashem's greatest gift to B'Nai Yisrael.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, z"l, focuses on a lesson from the Rebbe – that the majority report reflects a fear of success, not a fear of the Canaanites defeating the Jews. According to the Rebbe, the leaders cherish living in the Midbar, where they live close to Hashem, study Torah all day, eat meals from Hashem, and avoid work that living in the land would require. Rabbi Sacks' response is that the mission of B'nei Yisrael is to create a model society with human dignity and chesed for anyone in need. A model society requires land, an economy, an army, flocks, labor, and an economy.

We Jews have been fighting for Israel for nearly eighty years – much longer counting the two thousand years praying and hoping to reclaim our land and country. The price is very heavy, especially with the loss of those who have fallen from attacks by our enemies. Fortunately the brutal attacks in the past nearly three years have brought Israelis closer and encouraged many Jews and especially Israelis to increase their levels of mitzvot.

The discussions of the Meraglim from my beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l, from more than a quarter century ago remain vivid in my mind. Rabbi Cahan brought out many insights from this parsha, including lessons from comparing this parsha with Moshe's repetition of the story in Sefer Devarim. Connections with language and situations in various parts of the Torah continue to fascinate me after many years of study. One of our most important tasks is to understand Hashem's lessons and teach them to our children and grandchildren.

Shabbat Shalom,

Hannah & Alan

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**Much of the inspiration for my weekly Dvar Torah message comes from the insights of Rabbi David Fohrman and his team of scholars at [www.alephbeta.org](http://www.alephbeta.org). Please join me in supporting this wonderful organization, which has increased its scholarly work during and since the pandemic, despite many of its supporters having to cut back on their donations.**

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**Please daven for a Refuah Shleimah for Velvel David ben Sarah Rachel; Moshe Aaron ben Leah Beilah (badly wounded in battle in Gaza but slowly recovering), Daniel Yitzchak Meir HaLevy ben Ruth; Avram David ben Zeezi Esther; Ariah Ben Sarah, Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Reuven ben Basha Chaya Zlata Lana, Avraham ben Gavriela, Mordechai ben Chaya, David Moshe ben Raizel; Zvi ben Sara Chaya, Reuven ben Masha, Meir ben Sara, Oscar ben Simcha; Miriam Bat Leah; Rena Michal bat Sara, Yehudit Leah bas Hannah Feiga; Miriam bat Esha, Chana bat Sarah; Raizel bat Rut; Rena bat Ilsa, Riva Golda bat Leah, Sharon bat Sarah, Kayla bat Ester, and Malka bat Simcha, and all our fellow Jews in danger in and near Israel.** Please contact me for any additions or subtractions. Thank you.

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## **Haftarat Parshat Shelach: When Status Obscures Mission**

By Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander \*  
President and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone

*Rabbi Brander dedicates his Dvar Haftarah this week to the heroic soldiers, security forces and first responders of the IDF, defenders of the Jewish people and the land of Israel, and the United States Armed Forces, defenders of liberty and justice for all. May Hashem protect them and bring them all home speedily and safely.*

The obvious link between Parshat Shelach, in which Moshe sends men to scout out the Land, and its haftarah, the story from the book of Yehoshua (ch. 2) of the spies sent to Jericho, is the shared theme of emissaries. But a closer look at the differences between these two missions reveals something far more significant than a surface parallel. Read together,

these two stories expose the core moral failure of the desert generation and the corrective embodied by those who came next.

A close reading of Parshat Shelach reveals that the twelve men dispatched by Moshe were never actually called *meraglim* (spies). Rather, they were charged to *latur et ha'aretz*, to travel through the land. This was not a covert military intelligence operation; if it were, Moshe would not have sent prominent leaders from each tribe, a delegation large enough to attract attention wherever they went. Their mission was diplomatic in nature: to encounter the land, absorb its character, and return as ambassadors, each man helping his own tribe envision what awaited them there. It was, in essence, an exercise in public vision-building, an attempt to unify a newly-freed, multitribal people around a shared destiny.

What went wrong was not tactical, but moral. These were not ordinary men; they were men of influence: tribal princes, public figures. Instead of elevating what they saw into a compelling national vision, they allowed their own personal anxieties and insecurities to shape the public narrative, fanning the people's fears and agitating against the very mission they had been entrusted to advance.

Now consider the spies in the haftarah. Two men, unnamed, are sent by Yehoshua to scout Jericho. Their mission is explicitly strategic: to gather the tactical intelligence needed to capture the land. There is no ceremony, no tribal representation, no public mandate. They go quietly, operate discreetly, and return with actionable information. Their mission succeeds, in part because they themselves recede, without names, titles, or personal stakes in the outcome. And precisely because the story is not about them but about the people, they are free to rise above personal challenge and serve the objective.

This contrast in how the missions were undertaken is sharpened by a less obvious connection between Parshat Shelach and the haftarah, one that runs through the figure of the *mekoshesh etzim*, the wood gatherer who violates Shabbat and is put to death at the end of the parsha. Like the spies of Jericho, he remains unnamed. The Talmud (Shabbat 96b) records a striking debate on this point: Rabbi Akiva identifies him as Tzelofchad, known to us from the later narrative of his daughters, who pressed for their inheritance rights. Rabbi Yehuda ben Beteira rebukes Rabbi Akiva sharply: if the Torah chose to conceal this man's identity, then revealing it undermines that choice. The story is not about the individual, but about the principle: the sanctity of Shabbat, and the boundaries it establishes, which empower our relationship with God.

**Once a name enters the story, the focus shifts. Biography, personality, motives and weaknesses eclipse the idea itself.** [emphasis added]

This is precisely the dynamic that separates failure from success in the two narratives – the emissaries in the parsha and the spies in the haftarah. When identity, status, or personal objectives take center stage, even a divinely inspired mission can fail. The 12 leaders in the parsha, defined by their prominence, cannot disentangle themselves from their own anxiety-driven viewpoints. But the unnamed spies of Jericho carry no such baggage. They can disappear into the mission itself, without any self-interest, advancing the conquest of the land so that the Jewish people can live in their sacred space.

Together, these figures pose an important question about how we serve and live purposeful lives. In fact commentators suggest (Targum Yonatan Bamidbar 15:32, Tosafot Bava Batra 119b, s.v. "*Afilu Ketanah*") that the anonymous Shabbat-violating wood-collector acted with the intent of showing that even after the punishment of not entering the Land, the commandment of Shabbat remained binding.

Do we view ourselves as vehicles for something larger? Or do we allow our personal identities, anxieties, needs, and ambitions to shape or cloud the mission before us? In our everyday lives – and especially on a national level – these are important questions to ask. The haftarah's answer insists that genuine service requires a form of self-effacement: not the erasure of the self, but the willingness to let the values speak more loudly than the name. When the mission matters more than the personality, when the vision speaks louder than the title, that is when a person can act with true clarity, courage and impact.

Shabbat Shalom.

\* Ohr Torah Stone is a modern Orthodox group of 32 institutions and programs. Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin is the Founding Director, and Rabbi Dr. Brander is President and Rosh HaYeshiva. For more information or to support Ohr Torah Stone,

contact [ohrtorahstone@otsyn.org](mailto:ohrtorahstone@otsyn.org) or 212-935-8672. Donations to 49 West 45<sup>th</sup> Street #701, New York, NY 10036.

<https://ots.org.il/haftarat-parshat-shelach-rabbi-brander-5786/>

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## Parshat Shlach Lecha: The Weight of ‘Nevertheless’ and Kafka’s Empty Bucket

By Yoni Applebaum \* (June 16, 2025)

*“And they told him, and said: ‘We came to the land to which you sent us, and indeed it flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. Nevertheless, the people who dwell in the land are fierce, and the cities are very greatly fortified, and we also saw the offspring of the giants there.’” (Bamidbar 13:27–28)*

Many great minds have debated the nature of the spies’ sin, but that is not the focus of this article. Instead, I’ve chosen to linger on a single word amid the multitude of interpretations — especially because, at the time I was asked to write these few words, it happened to be the *yahrzeit* of Kafka. I believe the intersection of these two topics holds particularly interesting potential.

The Ramban notes that the spies did not lie — on the contrary: *“Did he send them with the expectation they would testify falsely?”* Indeed, the cities were large and fortified, and the land was abundant with fruit. So, what was their sin? The Ramban continues:

*“But their wickedness lies in the word ‘efes’ [‘nevertheless’], which connotes nullification and impossibility — something entirely beyond human reach. As in the expressions: ‘He’afes lanetzach chasdo – Has His kindness ceased forever?’ (Tehillim 77:9) or ‘There is no one else — efes — besides God’ (Yeshayahu 45:14)[1]. And thus they said to him: the land is rich and flows with milk and honey, and its fruit is good — but it is impossible to conquer it, for the people are strong, the cities are very greatly fortified, and we even saw giants there.”*

According to the Ramban, the critical issue lies in their use of the word *efes* — the shift away from the positive: the land is good — cloaked in a kind of cynicism, as if to say, *“Yes, it’s very good — but there’s no chance we’ll ever reach it. It’s too good to be true.”*

This rhetorical move — acknowledging the goodness only to negate it — is the essence of their sin. In effect, the spies hollowed out the profound seriousness of the true, ultimate claim — the very purpose of the journey — and turned it into something superficial. *“Efes, poor us!”* The good land? Suddenly, it no longer seems worth the trials of the desert — precisely because it is so good.

In his book *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, a collection of notes the Italian writer Italo Calvino prepared for a prestigious lecture series at an American university (the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures), he outlines six literary values to preserve for the coming millennium. The first is *“lightness”* — not as escapism, but as a response to the heaviness of reality: rigid institutions, habitual ways of thinking, or linguistic weight. For Calvino, lightness is a value to be preserved and cultivated.

And returning to the spies, we noted that the word *efes* is unique in that it takes a given reality and turns it on its head. From statements that are themselves positive and true, the spies slid into a grievous sin — a single word that renders the entire weight of their claim trivial. This is precisely the kind of paradox that Calvino identifies in Kafka[2] — though he sees it in a positive light. And I believe that perhaps even within our own tradition, we can find an intriguing use of this same rhetorical move, long before Kafka.

As we learned during our time in yeshiva, intertextual interpretations shine brilliantly in the Torah. Indeed, the phrase used by the spies — *“the cities are great and fortified”* — ultimately enjoys a rather successful afterlife, revealing something about the Torah’s own capacity to neutralize what many commentators initially viewed as a wholly negative and exclusive expression of the spies. In the book of Devarim, Moshe himself quotes the very claims that arose during the sin of the

spies:

*“Where are we going up? Our brothers have made our hearts melt, saying: ‘The people are greater and taller than we; the cities are great and fortified up to the heavens, and we also saw the children of the giants there.’”[3]*

*“Hear, O Israel, today you are crossing the Jordan to dispossess nations greater and mightier than you, cities great and fortified up to the heavens.” (Devarim 1:28; 9:1)*

The Ramban notices this and continues his commentary in Bamidbar:

*“Behold, Moshe Rabbeinu spoke to their children in similar terms — and even exaggerated the strength of the people and the fortification of their cities, and the might of the giants, beyond what the spies had told their parents, as it is written: ‘Hear, O Israel, you are crossing the Jordan to dispossess nations greater and mightier than you, cities great and fortified up to the heavens, a great and tall people, children of the giants, whom you know and of whom you have heard — who can stand before the children of the giant?’ (Devarim 9:1–2). And if this was the spies’ crime, why would Moshe dishearten the hearts of their children as the spies did to their parents?”*

The Ramban expresses surprise that Moshe would say these things to the current generation — one that did not belong to the generation of the spies — and even more so after opening with the words *“Hear, O Israel.”* His words seem to offer a defense of the spies — that they had spoken truthfully. The Ramban’s answer, as we saw above, once again focuses on the precise meaning of the word *efes*. It was not only permitted but necessary to report on the great and fortified cities. But the addition of the word *efes* — *“however”* or *“nevertheless”* — lies at the heart of the sin. That word is the very crux of the matter, and it is what enables Moshe to later reuse the same claim without alteration — this time as a constructive teaching.[4]

Calvino mentions Kafka’s[5] story that led him to reflect on this elusive quality of lightness and what it encapsulates. In the short story “The Bucket Rider,” a poor man goes out on a bitter winter night in search of coal. He rides an empty coal bucket, asks for help — and is rejected. The story ends on a surreal note, as the coal-seeker rides his empty bucket beyond the ice mountains. Kafka writes that the bucket is so light it carries the man upon it.

This bucket, writes Calvino, is not merely a metaphor. It is a symbol of wanting, of longing, and searching — lifting you precisely to that point where even the humblest request, a handful of coal, can no longer be fulfilled

He goes on to say: *“Many of Kafka’s short stories are steeped in mystery, and this one especially. Perhaps Kafka simply meant to tell us that setting out to seek coal on a wartime winter night transforms the jostling of an empty bucket into the journey of a wandering knight, or a desert crossing atop a caravan, or flight upon a magic carpet.”*

It is precisely the emptiness — the literal void of the bucket, the sparseness of the story stripped of description, light as a feather — that makes flight imaginable. It is lack that opens the door to new perspectives. This is the power Calvino finds in Kafka’s prose: a precise depiction of a given reality, no matter how grim, that enables a lighthearted glance at the heaviness of existence without being crushed by it. To say *efes*, and then discover how a fearful claim in the mouths of spies can become a confident one in the mouth of a prophet.

Let us conclude with Calvino’s own parting wish:

*“And so, riding our bucket, we head toward the new millennium—not hoping to find there anything other than what we bring with us. Lightness, for instance—which I have tried to evoke here.”*

*In the harsh reality of our times, we would do well to internalize the message embedded in the Sin of the Spies — and in the inner reworking of their words by the Torah itself. It teaches us the value of understanding things with a certain lightness — not indifference, not cynicism, but a true emptiness, a “God has left me” moment, from which a new faith may be born.*

## Footnotes:

[1] “‘But only [efes] the word that I speak to you — that you shall speak’ (Bamidbar 22:35); Yeshayahu 45:6: ‘For there is none [efes] besides Me; I am the Lord and there is no other.’

Think also of ‘There is none besides Him’ [efes zulato] from Aleinu Leshabe’ach, in the Pesukei Dezimra of the Shabbat prayer.”

[2] This stands in contrast to the analysis of another renowned author, David Foster Wallace, in his essay *Some Remarks on Kafka’s Funniness*. If space allowed, one could juxtapose the Italian and the American — how do they each interpret the Czech?

[3] Many scholars and commentators have noted that in the book of Devarim, Moshe — speaking to the next generation (which still included some from the Exodus generation) — places the Sin of the Spies before the sin of the Golden Calf, and not by coincidence. This verse in Devarim aligns closely with the verse in our portion: “Efes, for the people are strong.”

[4] One might suggest that the shift lies in the addition of the word “heavens” [shamayim], though that would lead us into an entirely different cultural realm — a comparison more interreligious than literary. Since we have now completed the analytical-Torah portion of this dvar Torah and have entered the gates of homiletics, I’ll add another comment from the Ramban. He resolves Moshe’s ‘dangerous’ reuse of the spies’ very words by framing it as an educational message. Why did Moshe take the risk of sounding like the spies? Because of the need to warn the people — now poised to enter and conquer the land — against the grave spiritual danger of thinking, “My own strength and the might of my hand have made me this wealth.” From here, the classic vorts are well known.

But since we’ve already opened a footnote, it’s worth noting that this is far from the only instance in which the spies’ argument returns in the Bible — not as a sin, but as a superlative. We encounter it again throughout Scripture: in the book of Yehoshua, in Melachim I, and most strikingly in the opening of Nechemiah. There, in the great confession speech and the covenant renewal during the Second Temple period, Ezra indicts the people of the First Temple era (whose sins led to Israel’s exile and whose descendants, the returnees from Babylon, are now struggling to reestablish life in the land with meager resources). He accuses them of eating, satisfying their bellies, and growing fat — thanks to the fortified cities they conquered and the houses full of good things they inherited in the land of Canaan.

Notably, there is no mention at all of the Sin of the Spies (!), nor the “fortified cities” of the spies’ report — but fortified cities as a symbol of storage, abundance, and material prosperity. The fertile land fills man’s heart with pride. This recalls the Ramban’s comment: we are dealing here with a matter entirely distinct from the Sin of the Spies. In fact, the phrase has already been severed from that sin. Which brings us back to the question: why, then, were the spies punished so harshly?

[5] It’s worth noting that he began his journey into the notion of ‘lightness’ in literature with Ovid, passed through Lucretius and Cavalcanti, moved on to Cyrano de Bergerac and Medusa, and ended with Kafka — quite the journey, all in an effort to avoid the book of Bamidbar!

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[Ed. note: from OTS: Among this year’s overseas students at Midreshet Lindenbaum’s Maria and Joel Finkle Overseas Program, 16 young women - 27% of the cohort - have chosen to remain in Israel next year to serve the country, whether in the IDF or some other form of National Service.]

<https://ots.org.il/shlach-yoni-applebaum/>

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## Dvar Torah: Shlach: A Sacred Date

By Rabbi Label Lam © 2007

*The entire community raised their voices and shouted, and the people wept on that night.*

(Bamidbar 14:1)

*the people wept on that night: From that moment the destruction of the Temple was decreed, since it was the night of Tisha' B'Av. The Holy One Blessed is He said they are crying a cry for nothing, so I will fix for them a crying for generations. (Mosef Rashi)*

What's so terrible about crying a cry for nothing? It sounds a lot like the father or teacher that says to the child, "You want to complain?! I'll give you something to complain about!" To the untutored ear it seems a vengeful and petty style of responding. It must be much more than that since we have been mopping up the fallout of those baseless tears for way too long now.

The first thing to appreciate is that there are no purely punitive punishments. The consequences of life must have a rehabilitative component. There-in is the promise of a cure. How does that apply here in the case of the wasteful cry that now lingers for generations?

I remember being engaged in a lively discussion more than once about why Holocaust Day is not so honored by the strictly observant community. It is certainly not out of disrespect for those who perished at the cruel hands of the Nazis during the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War. No, rather it is out of an appreciation of the wisdom of the sages. They understood that the primary cause for later tragedies can all be traced to the destruction of the Temple and the subsequent experience of exile. Now we discover that Tisha B'Av hearkens back to a foolish investment of emotions that not only put the Children of Israel on a 40 year detour but set the template for all future problems. Tisha B'Av remains the focal point of national mourning for an important reason. Why?

There was a gentleman who was feeling overwhelmed by his mounting worries. He sought out a wise man who gave him a simple and practical piece of advice that helped him with the carrying of his burden without entirely removing. The wise man told him to set aside ten minutes in the day, every day, and during that time he should worry away, but afterwards he should not indulge himself at all in the futile exercise of worry for the rest of the day.

The positive result came about because his concerns were no longer spilling out of that appointed time slot and bleeding into the whole day rendering him dysfunctional. Once he was done with his worries, he was done, till the next time. He was no longer the slave of a random attack of worry. Like other aspects of life he pigeonholed it and dealt with it head on at the right time.

So too, on Tisha B'Av we are all expected to immerse ourselves in sadness, but that gloomy mood is only for one day. After that time we can go back to cheerful and productive life. The Temple would be destroyed the Torah anticipated, "*because you did not serve HASHEM your G-d with joy and a good heart!*" Tisha B'Av helps us to manage our emotions so we should not be overly burdened by sadness.

Save that negativity for Tisha B'Av! Don't cry for nothing now! Cry for the Beis HaMikdash! Whenever an unhappy thought invade our minds, it needs to be addressed and redirected, but at a pre-appointed- appropriate time. By soaking in sadness for one day we can be joyous and appreciative a whole year. There is a huge benefit for us to save and savor our tears and all of our emotions for **a sacred date**.

<https://torah.org/torah-portion/dvartorah-5774-shlach/> [from 2007 but posted 2014]

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## Shelach: It's Good Because I Say So

By Rabbi Dov Linzer\*

Rosh Yeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah © 2016, 2019

The story of the spies returning with their evil report is well known, but the reason they were punished is not commonly understood. What did they do wrong? They reported what they saw accurately. Ramban suggests an answer. The key, he says, is in their use of the word *efes*, "*however*": "However, the people be strong that dwell in the land, and the cities are walled, and very great" (Bamidbar 13:28). Ramban says that *efes* means "*nothing*" here (it later came to mean "*zero*"):

“Their wickedness was in their use of the word *efes*, which indicates that the matter is completely impossible” (Ramban on verse 27). To say that it was impossible demoralized the people and demonstrated, perhaps even propagated, a lack of faith in God. I would like to suggest that the key is a different word, one that they failed to use. That word is *tova*, “good,” a word introduced by Moshe.

Before sending out the spies, Moshe instructed them to search out the land, to assess the military strength of its inhabitants, and to consider the best tactics for invading and conquering it. True, God had promised to give them the land, but it was their responsibility to wage the war for its possession as strategically and intelligently as possible. All this is well and good, but then comes a troubling phrase in Moshe’s instructions: “*And what of the land that they dwell in, is it good or bad?*” (13:19). This is not a question of description or fact, rather, it is a request for an evaluative assessment. The question also seems unrelated to issues of military strategy. That Moshe would ask whether the land was good or not is quite astonishing given that God explicitly told him that God would bring them to “*a good land, one flowing in milk and honey*” (Shemot 3:8).

To resolve this problem, a number of commentators interpret this question as one of military assessment, not one of judgment of the overall quality of the land. Rashbam, for example, states that Moshe was asking if the land was full of grain in trying to determine if the people could sustain themselves through the invasion. Rashi and Ibn Ezra, however, understand that Moshe was asking a general question about the quality of the land: Are there plentiful sources of water? Are the air and water of good quality or bad? Regardless of Moshe’s intent, the request for an overall assessment of the land — is it good or bad — had been made.

How was this question answered? It was not. When the spies came back, they accurately reported that the land was “*flowing with milk and honey*” (13:27). What they failed to say was that the land was “*good*,” and this amounted to a refusal to give the land their approval and to affirm God’s promise. On the other hand, we have the crux of Calev and Yehoshua’s response: “*And they spoke unto all the company of the children of Israel, saying, ‘The land, which we passed through to search it, is good, very, very much so’*” (14:7). The spies understood their mission to be not just to report on facts or to evaluate what they saw from a military perspective; but to determine whether the entire endeavor was worthwhile in the first place. Was the land good? Was it worth the battle? In contrast, Calev and Yehoshua came in committed to the goodness of the land and the rightness of the enterprise. For them, it was given that the land was good and that God would help them conquer it. They did not need to spy out the land to determine this. Their mission — as they properly understood it — was only to determine how best to go about waging the war, how best to make God’s plan succeed.

For those who were not committed to the enterprise from the outset, who did not believe that the land was good, every problem loomed large, and every challenge became an obstacle. It was different for those who began with a fundamental belief in God’s promise and the goodness of the land. Whatever the problems or challenges, they would be met and dealt with: “*We shall surely ascend and conquer it, for we can surely do it!*” (13:30).

**Quite often, our expectations of worthwhileness or the likely success of our endeavors become self-fulfilling prophecies. When we start believing that something is impossible or that the effort is not worth it, then it will be impossible, and we will fail. But if we believe that the cause is good, that it is achievable, and that God is on our side, then we are likely to make our imagined future a reality.** To quote from the late Muhammad Ali, “Impossible is just a small word that is thrown around by small men who find it easier to live in a world they’ve been given than to explore the power they have to change it. Impossible is not a fact. It is an opinion. Impossible is not a declaration. It is a dare. Impossible is potential. Impossible is temporary. Impossible is nothing!” [emphasis added]

This is also true of our relationships, as our assessments of others so often become self-fulfilling prophecies. The Gemara (Berakhot 8a; Yevamot 63b) tells us that when a man would get married in the land of Israel his friends would ask him, “*matza or motzei*,” “*found or find?*” Is the marriage a *matza*, as the verse states, “*matza isha matza tov*,” “a man who has found a woman has found goodness” (Mishlei 18:24)? Or is it a *motzei*, as the verse states, “*u’motzei ani mar mimavet et ha’isha*,” “I find the woman more bitter than death” (Kohelet 7:26)? On the face of it, this was a roundabout and clever way of asking the man if his wife was a good match for him (although it needs to be acknowledged that the second verse seems to communicate a strongly negative attitude about women in general).

There is, however, another way to understand this, namely, that the question is not so much about the bride as about the

groom. What type of person is he? Is he a matza or a motzei? Is he “one who has found,” or “one who is always finding”? **No match will be perfect. There will always be things one spouse will do that will annoy the other and ways in which the two are not fully compatible.** The question is, with what mindset does one enter the relationship? If a person enters the relationship believing — like Calev and Yeshoshua — that it is good, that they are fortunate to be marrying this person, then they will most likely be happy in the marriage. Such a person is a matza, one who stops looking once they have found the thing they are looking for. And thus, *matza isha matza tov*; if he comes in believing it is good, it will indeed be good. [emphasis added]

However, if a person — like the spies — enters the relationship constantly asking, “*Is this good or bad?*,” “*Did I make the right decision or the wrong one?*,” then he or she is bound to be dissatisfied and unhappy. Such a person is a *motzei*, a person who, even after finding what they are after, is constantly looking and never satisfied. For such a man, any problem he finds in his wife or in the relationship will be proof that the match is not a good one, and he will find it or her to be “*as bitter as death.*”

This is not to say that a person should sacrifice his or her critical faculties. Some marriages are not meant to be, and some endeavors are truly not worth the effort and should be abandoned. The question is with what attitude we choose to undertake our tasks, enter into our relationships, and think about our lot in life. If we start with the belief that “*it is very good,*” then in most cases, it will remain good and beautiful, warts and all. But if we hold onto the need to constantly assess whether it is good or bad, then we will see the good but discount it. The land may be flowing with milk and honey, but in our eyes, it will be a “*land that eats its inhabitants.*”

If we are able to embrace this attribute of *matza*, to see the land that God has given us — the land of Israel and the State of Israel — as a blessing, and to see our spouses, children, parents, and friends as gifts from God, then we will find the wherewithal to face the problems and challenges, come what may. If we believe that our endeavors are good and worthwhile, if we believe that they are possible, then they will be. “*We shall surely ascend, for surely we can do it!*”

Shabbat Shalom!

From my archives

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## Nishmat haTorah: Parashat Shelach Parshat Shelach: Dreaming While Awake By Rabbi Ysoscher Katz \*

The Ponevezh Yeshivah is one of the largest and most storied yeshivot in Israel. Located in the center of Bnei Brak, it sits on a large and impressive campus spread across a hill. On one end stands the main beit midrash, with room for roughly one thousand students. Opposite the beit midrash is an equally large dining room, built to accommodate the student body. Along the sides are dormitories, a library, and everything else needed for a large Torah community to flourish.

The yeshivah was built in the early years of the State by its Rosh Yeshivah, Rabbi Yosef Kahaneman z”l. Before it was built, the site was a barren hill, overgrown with weeds. A story is told that one day, when the hill was still desolate, R. Kahaneman took a friend for a walk in Bnei Brak. When they reached that empty, neglected hill, he described his plan to turn it into a sprawling Torah center in Eretz Yisrael.

His friend thought he was getting carried away. He looked at him and said, “*Yosef, you are dreaming. There is no way this elaborate plan for an empty lot will come to fruition.*”

Without missing a beat, R. Kahaneman responded: “*Indeed, I am dreaming. But I am not asleep.*”

It was a dream, yes, but not a fantasy. R. Kahaneman was fully awake to the difficulty of what he was attempting. He understood how ambitious, perhaps even improbable, his vision was. But he also understood that certain sacred projects are only built by people who refuse to allow the present to define the limits of the future.

This message is also at the heart of this week's Torah portion, parshat Shelach. In the parsha, we read the story of the meraglim, the spies sent by the Jewish people to scout out the land while they were still in the midbar.

In a painful and sobering turn, the spies return overwhelmed by what they have seen. Giants roam the cities, the soil produces enormous fruit, and the land is fortified with seemingly impenetrable walls. Conquering the land appears impossible. They report all this to the people. Strikingly, much of what they say is true.

When the people hear this grave report, they break down. They turn their fear against God and Moshe, and in their despair they claim that they would have preferred to remain in Egypt rather than be brought to this point.

Yet what happens next is surprising. Despite what seems, on the surface, to be an honest report, God reacts harshly. The spies are punished, and the generation that accepted their report is condemned to remain in the wilderness, never entering the Promised Land.

The question almost asks itself. If the spies merely reported what they saw, why was their sin so severe?

**The failure of the meraglim was not that they lied about what they saw. On some level, they described reality as it appeared to them. But they lacked what R. Kahaneman later understood: that one can dream without being asleep. Their failure was that they allowed the visible facts to become the full horizon of possibility. They could see the giants, the fruit, and the fortified cities, but they could not imagine a future larger than the obstacles in front of them.** [emphasis added]

The meraglim were not punished simply for being realistic. They were punished because they allowed the obstacles they saw to overwhelm the promise they had heard. They saw the challenges accurately, but they could not see beyond them. They could not imagine that God's promise might demand more of them than the sober calculus of what seemed possible.

One can even argue that their punishment was not merely retributive, but the natural consequence of their failure. A generation unable to imagine that this frightening land could still become their promised future was not yet ready to enter it. Their inability to see beyond the obvious meant that they were not ready to build a future shaped by promise rather than fear.

To cultivate a life of Torah, to create community, to mend what is broken, one has to be able to dream beyond the immediately plausible. Facts matter, of course. But one must refuse to let facts alone determine the boundaries of hope. Religious life requires seeing the world as it is, while still believing that what seems impossible today need not remain impossible tomorrow.

A similar dynamic appears earlier, at the beginning of Moshe's mission. When God told Moshe Rabbeinu to tell the Jewish people that after years of enslavement Pharaoh would finally release them, Moshe was skeptical. Such a reversal of fortune did not seem likely. Moshe tried to reason with God, arguing that a people worn down by slavery would not believe him (Exodus 4:1). Here too, Moshe's argument makes sense. And yet God still sends him.

**The failure of the meraglim helps clarify what God was demanding of Moshe. At that crucial juncture in our history, Moshe had to learn that there are moments when one must transcend the limits of what seems reasonable and follow the deeper demands of faith and responsibility. It was his task to help unshackle the Jewish people from Egyptian bondage, even when redemption seemed unimaginable.** [emphasis added]

That is often how meaningful change begins. Not with certainty. Not with proof that success is guaranteed. It begins with the ability to look at a barren hill and see a beit midrash; to look at a frightened people and see a nation; to look at a broken world and still believe that it can be made more whole.

The point is not to ignore reality. R. Kahaneman's formulation was precisely the opposite. We are asked to dream while awake: to see reality clearly, with all its challenges and constraints, and still refuse to surrender the future to the present.

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Torah, Bronx, NY. [note: some Hebrew text omitted because of software issues]

<https://library.yctorah.org/2026/06/parshat-shelach-dreaming-while-awake/>

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## Facing Realities: Thoughts for Parashat Shelah Lekha

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel \*

Moses sent twelve spies, the leaders of each of the tribes of Israel, to go into the Promised Land and come back with a report. All twelve agreed that the land was wonderful but ten of them thought the inhabitants were too powerful to overcome. Caleb and Joshua called on the people to trust the Almighty, who would help them conquer the opponents.

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz describes the controversy between the two groups of spies. Ten of them thought the people were better off in the wilderness. Entering the land, after all, would entail war. Settling the land would require hard work — agriculture, building, creating infrastructure etc. In the wilderness, the people were provided with manna from heaven; they had no material responsibilities; they could devote themselves entirely to spiritual matters.

Caleb and Joshua contended that the people could not fulfill their earthly mission unless they took responsibility for establishing their own country. God had freed them from Egypt so that they would become a self-respecting nation. The Torah is meant to be lived in this world, with all its challenges and opportunities.

Rabbi Steinsaltz points out that the argument of the spies can be heard frequently even today. *“Why should we lose our abstract spiritual essence, our Torah, and our manna, solely in order to go to the Land of Israel? It is better to remain in the wilderness.”* (*Talks on the Parasha*, p. 306).

The error of the ten spies was that they wanted an other-worldly spiritual perfection, free of the responsibilities of nation-building. Let God provide everything and let us avoid the nitty-gritty of running a society with all the challenges that entails.

Their error is echoed by many today — Jewish and non-Jewish — who expect the people of Israel to be absolutely pure, and who feel that Israel is tainted by having to deal with the everyday issues of war, economics, politics etc. Wouldn't things be better if Jews stayed in the wilderness seeking spiritual perfection, rather than getting their hands dirty in the real world?

**Although Jewish critics of Israel are diverse, they seem to have one thing in common. They insist that the Jewish state be inhumanly perfect. For them, a Jewish state will never be satisfactory as long as Jews have to wage wars, kill enemies, rule over non-Jews, engage in political infighting, deal with social inequalities etc.** [emphasis added]

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935) noted that *“the great idealists seek an order so noble, so firm and pure, beyond what may be found in the world of reality, and thus they destroy what has been fashioned in conformity to the norms of the world.”* Such people, through their unrealistic religiosity or idealism, in fact are part of what Rav Kook called *“the world of chaos”* rather than *“the world of order.”* Misguided idealism is destructive. **Insisting that Jews be “angels” rather than real human beings is also a form of antisemitism.** [emphasis added]

Already in the 19th century, Rabbi Yehuda Alkalai (1798-1878) lamented that rabbis of his time opposed resettlement of Jews in Israel until Messianic times. He rebuked those *“who say with full mouth that Jerusalem was only created for the sake of Torah study. While their intention is acceptable, their deeds are unacceptable. It is impossible to conduct life in this world as though it were the world-to-come, where there is no need to eat or drink.”*

The approach of the ten spies is still espoused by many today. But just as their error caused massive suffering to the people then, it can cause serious harm to us today. We need to hear the courageous and faithful voices of Caleb and Joshua. Reality is difficult; escapism is far worse.

The future of Israel and the Jewish People will be secured by those who share the dream of a Jewish homeland that strives to be a *"light unto the nations."* The goal is to make Israel as great as humanly possible, not to demand absolute perfection.

**To demand the impossible is not only unrealistic: it is dangerous and self-destructive.** [emphasis added]

\* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. and rabbi emeritus of the historic Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York City. Rabbi Marc Angel has a youtube series on religion and literature, with the first session dealing with the teachings of Ralph Waldo Emerson: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bqP9UMJOwmk>

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## Paired Perspectives on the Parashah: Shelah

By Rabbi Hayyim Angel \*

The spies narrative (Numbers 13-14) is among the most familiar and devastating stories in the Torah. In its presentation in the Book of Numbers, the narrative appears straightforward. God commands Moses to send spies to survey the Land of Israel. Moses agrees and instructs the spies regarding their mission. The spies themselves are distinguished leaders, divinely sanctioned representatives of the tribes. Everything about the mission initially appears legitimate and proper.

The catastrophe emerges only afterward. Ten spies return with a demoralizing report, the nation loses faith, and God decrees that the generation of the wilderness will perish before entering the land. In the plain sense of Numbers, the sin lies in the people's faithlessness and despair after hearing the spies' report.

However, the Book of Deuteronomy dramatically complicates this picture.

Moses's retelling of the spies narrative in Deuteronomy chapter 1 is not an independent account. It plainly assumes familiarity with the original story in Numbers. Yet the retelling systematically shifts the emphasis of the narrative and redistributes responsibility in striking ways.

In Numbers, God appears to initiate the mission: *"Send men for yourself, and let them spy out the land of Canaan"* (Numbers 13:2).

In Deuteronomy, however, the initiative comes from the people: *"Then all of you approached me and said: Let us send men before us"* (Deuteronomy 1:22). Moses then states: *"The matter was good in my eyes"* (1:23).

Remarkably, God is not mentioned at all in connection with authorizing the mission until after the disaster unfolds and the decree is issued. In the plain sense of Deuteronomy, the mission appears to have originated with the people and to have been approved by Moses himself.

This shift is not merely technical. It fundamentally alters the theological atmosphere of the episode.

Even the language of Moses's rebuke differs sharply from Numbers. In Deuteronomy, Moses emphasizes the nation's initiative: *va-tikrevun elai kullekhem* (1:22). The phrase can be translated neutrally as *"you approached me,"* though some commentators hear a more accusatory tone: *"you pressed upon me"* or *"you demanded of me."* Either way, the emphasis falls upon the people's initiative rather than upon divine command.

How, then, can Deuteronomy's retelling coexist with Numbers's original presentation?

**Drawing on Midrashic tradition, Rashi argues that Deuteronomy reveals the hidden truth behind the story all along.** The request to send spies was itself sinful from the outset. **According to Rashi, the demand for reconnaissance reflected a lack of trust in God immediately after Moses had enthusiastically promised that God would give them the land.** For Rashi, the very desire to investigate and verify the land after God's promise already betrayed deficient faith. [emphasis added]

Accordingly, Rashi reads Moses's words in Deuteronomy sharply. *Va-tikrevun elai kullekhem* does not mean merely "you approached me," but **carries a critical tone: despite Moses's encouragement and God's promise, the people pressed for spies anyway.** [emphasis added]

Even more strikingly, Rashi explains "*the matter was good in my eyes*" (1:23) to mean that Moses only pretended to approve of the request. Rashi compares Moses to a salesman displaying confidence in a used donkey to discourage further inquiry. Moses hoped that by expressing confidence, the people would abandon the desire to investigate the land altogether.

When they persisted, however, God acceded reluctantly: *shelah lekha anashim* — *send for yourself* (Numbers 13:2). According to Rashi, the phrase implies divine disapproval: "*I am not commanding this; if you wish, send them.*"

**In this reading, the downfall occurred before the spies even departed. The actual mission merely exposed the people's already defective faith.** [emphasis added]

Rashi's interpretation is powerful and coherent, but it comes at a significant textual cost. In Deuteronomy, Moses's statement that "*the matter was good in my eyes*" sounds like genuine approval, not strategic pretense. Likewise, Numbers presents the mission as divinely sanctioned. God speaks directly to Moses, and the spies depart "*by the word of the Lord*" (Numbers 13:3). Nothing in the narrative overtly conveys reluctant divine concession.

Ramban therefore rejects Rashi's reinterpretation. Although Ramban agrees that the people initiated the request and that God responded afterward, he insists that the request itself was entirely legitimate.

For Ramban, prudent military reconnaissance does not contradict faith. Moses himself later sends spies, and Joshua does so as well before the conquest of Jericho. Gathering intelligence is normal military behavior, not religious betrayal.

Accordingly, Ramban reads *va-tikrevun elai kullekhem* (Deuteronomy 1:22) neutrally: "*Then you approached me.*"

Likewise, *shelah lekha anashim* (Numbers 13:2) is simply standard biblical idiom meaning "*send.*" The sin occurred only later, when the spies abused their mission and the people succumbed to panic and rebellion.

**Ramban** thus harmonizes the two narratives without fundamentally reinterpreting either one. The people requested spies, Moses approved, and God endorsed the plan. **The catastrophe emerged only afterward through the spies' panic-inducing report and the people's loss of faith.** [emphasis added]

Ramban's approach resolves the major textual difficulties raised by Rashi's interpretation. It preserves Moses's straightforward approval in Deuteronomy while also maintaining Numbers's clear presentation of divine sanction. At the same time, Ramban preserves a broader theological principle: responsible human effort and strategic planning coexist with faith rather than undermine it.

Thus, while Rashi sees Deuteronomy as uncovering the hidden failure already present at the beginning of the episode, Ramban views Deuteronomy as supplementing — but not overturning — the original presentation in Numbers. **At stake in the debate between Rashi and Ramban is not merely how to read one biblical episode, but a larger question about the relationship between faith and human initiative in religious life.** [emphasis added]

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## Rabbi Jonathan Sacks on Difference and Human Dignity

By Jonathan Arking \*

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks was undoubtedly one of the greatest Jewish leaders and thinkers of the last generation. Born in London in 1948, Rabbi Sacks studied philosophy at Cambridge and Oxford and was awarded a PhD in philosophy from King's College London in 1981. In 1976, Rabbi Sacks received rabbinic ordination from Jews' College and Yeshiva Etz Chaim, London. Rabbi Sacks went on to serve as Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth from 1991 until 2013. Throughout his illustrious career, Sacks wrote elegantly and compellingly on all manner of Jewish topics, including the relationship between science and religion, religious violence, morality, and much more.

I want to discuss Rabbi Sacks' emphasis on what he called "the dignity of difference." In response to increasing tribalism and parochialism, Rabbi Sacks warned against the other extreme: universalism. Articulated brilliantly in his book *The Dignity of Difference*, which was written in the wake of 9/11, Rabbi Sacks makes the case for a model of engagement with others that both recognizes and prioritizes the shared humanity across difference, without simultaneously insisting on a hegemonic sameness that, just like tribalism, easily shifts into violence and conflict. It is worth noting in passing the extent to which this view of Sacks' parallels that of Bernard Williams, one of his teachers at Cambridge.

One of the preeminent moral philosophers of the twentieth century, Williams harbored a deep skepticism toward moral theories that claimed to provide a comprehensive and universal account of how all people ought to live. In a famous 1979 essay, "Internal and External Reasons," Williams challenged the assumption that there are reasons for action that apply to all rational people regardless of their particular desires, commitments, and projects. Philosophers often speak as though moral obligations are simply there to be recognized, and that anyone who fails to recognize them is not merely mistaken, but irrational. Williams argued that this picture obscures an important truth: human beings act on the basis of particular histories, motivations, and ways of seeing the world. Appeals to supposedly universal reasons can therefore become a kind of moral bluff, allowing us to express disapproval of other's actions while presenting that disapproval as if it were simply the necessary conclusion of "rational thinking." The idea is that there is something wrong with you if you do not see the world as I do.

Rabbi Sacks, like Williams, recognized that appeals to universality can easily become dehumanizing, particularly toward those whose identity and way of life differ from that of the dominant culture. If failure to respond to the "truth" of some claim indicates a fundamental deficiency — or worse, wickedness — then it is perhaps unsurprising that Jews, among others, have so often been persecuted for refusing to conform to a supposedly universal truth.

Rabbi Sacks argues that is precisely the genius of our tradition. The Torah, he points out, moves in a counterintuitive direction. In considering the evolution of a society, we tend to move from part to whole: we consider isolated man and his needs, on the basis of which he forms a family, which, in order to coordinate its thriving, joins with other families to form a town, and so on. We assume that the direction of development is ever extending outwards. But Genesis does the opposite. It proceeds from God's creation of the cosmos to the creation of man, the world-wide catastrophe of the flood and then to

the dispersing at Babel, all of which builds up to God's covenantal relationship with one particular person, Abraham, and his family. While we must not forget the unity of God, and therefore the commonality of our origins, we learn how to live not through the contemplation of humanity in the abstract, but through the narrative of a particular family. It is precisely the transcendent unity of God, argues Rabbi Sacks, that sets God beyond any way of describing or being in the world. The difference manifest in the world reflects, perhaps paradoxically, the unity of the divine.

The perspective of unified truth is limited to God, and any appeal to it from within God's world fails to recognize the manifest particularity of God's creations. As Rabbi Sacks puts it, "*There is no universal language. There is no way we can speak, communicate, or even think without placing ourselves within the constraints of a particular language whose contours were shaped by hundreds of generations of speakers, storytellers, artists and visionaries who came before us, whose legacy we inherit and of whose story we become a part*" (*The Dignity of Difference*, 54). We do not transcend our particularity in order to understand others; rather, it is through inhabiting a particular tradition that we become capable of appreciating those of our neighbors.

For Rabbi Sacks, then, the alternative to tribalism is not universalism but covenantal particularity. The universality of moral concern emerges not from abstracting our concrete commitments but from them. As Rabbi Sacks explains, "*The universality of moral concerns is not something we learn by being universal but by being particular. Because we know what it is to be a parent, loving our children, not children in general, we understand what it is for someone else, somewhere else, to be a parent, loving his or her children, not ours*" (*The Dignity of Difference*, 55). We come to recognize the humanity of others not by denying the significance of family, community, and tradition, but by understanding that others are attached to their own families, communities, and traditions in much the same way that we are attached to ours.

In light of this argument, it is notable that Rabbi Sacks, in his reflections on "*the other*" and how Jews ought to relate to non-Jews, turns first inward, back to the texts that comprise our language. In *Not in God's Name*, Sacks argues that the book of Genesis repeatedly returns to the theme of sibling rivalry: Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers. These narratives, he contends, are not merely family dramas, but meditations on the rivalry that naturally arises between siblings when paternal love (from their fathers or from God) is perceived to be scarce.

The story of Isaac and Ishmael occupies a central place in this argument. The Torah is unequivocal about Isaac's status as heir to the Abrahamic covenant. Yet, Sacks observes, this does not mean that Ishmael is rejected. God hears Ishmael's cries in the wilderness, promises that he too will become a great nation, and remains present in his life. Sacks notes that Ishmael is portrayed with remarkable sympathy. His near-death scene in the wilderness is narrated with considerably more pathos than Isaac's binding, inviting readers to identify with his suffering. While it is often overlooked, the biblical text actually hints at a relationship between Isaac and Ishmael. Isaac, we know from the biblical text, lives at *beer lahai roi* after the Akedah (Gen. 24:62, 25:11), which is precisely the location at which God intervened to save Ishmael and Hagar earlier in the narrative (Gen. 16:13-14). To Sacks, this hints at a reconciliation between Isaac and Hagar and Ishmael. In fact, there is a midrash, quoted by Sacks, which not only identifies Hagar with Keturah, Abraham's second wife, but has Isaac act as their go-between. Finally, Isaac and Ishmael bury their father together.

These narrative clues (among others, not recounted here) indicate that, despite its central importance to the Torah, election is not the same thing as exclusion. To choose one path is not to condemn all others. The God who enters into covenant with Isaac is also the God who saves and blesses Ishmael. God's love exceeds the zero-sum calculations that characterize human rivalry. The covenant with one family does not imply the abandonment of all others.

This reading exemplifies the larger argument of *The Dignity of Difference*. Judaism does not ask us to abandon our particular commitments in the name of a universal humanity. Rather, it teaches us to see that the God who calls us into covenant is also the creator of those who stand outside that covenant. In recognizing the limits of universality, we return to our own language and our own texts. There we discover not a mandate to erase difference, but a model for honoring it — a way of engaging others that preserves the dignity of other ways of life without compromising our own covenantal commitments.

\* Graduate student in philosophy at Columbia University and grandson of Rabbi Marc Angel. This article is based on a presentation he made May 19, 2025 at a gathering of leaders of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals and leaders of the

Peace Islands Institute (Turkish Muslims).

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## **A Taste of Your Destination** by Rabbi Mordechai Rhine\* © 2026

*May this Dvar Torah be a Zechus Refuah Shileima for Cholei Yisroel*

The story of the Miraglim is a sad one. After Yetzias Mitzrayim, the Jewish people were ready to enter Eretz Yisroel and they sent spies to scout out the land. Most of the spies came back with a bad report. *“It is a dangerous and fearsome place,”* they reported. Their report swayed the people to fear.

I realize that the Miraglim didn't have time to visit Mikomos HaKidoshim (the holy sites) the way a tourist of today would. They were men with a task, focused on bringing back a report about the land. Even Koleiv who did travel to Chevron only did so because he realized how vulnerable he was to the peer pressure of the other Miraglim. But what would have been if they had visited the places that a good tour guide would take you to?

True, the Kevorim of Rabban Shimon bar Yochoie in Meron and the Arizal in Tzfas didn't exist yet. But there were places that a good tour guide could have taken them to. For example, the place of the Akeida, which would become the Beis HaMikdash; Be'er Sheva, where Avraham and Sara established their Eishel of hospitality; Shichem, where the brothers of Dina rescued her and punished the people for their lack of a judicial system; the field overlooking Sedom, where Avraham davened earnestly for Sedom to be spared, asking Hashem to give them another chance for Teshuva.

What would have been if the Miraglim would have taken some time off from their task to be tourists and explore the land which is so rich with history and eternal values? What might have been if they had visited these places that represent Avodah, Chesed, Arvus, justice, and our steadfast belief in prayer and that people can do Teshuva? Is it possible that they would have seen the land differently, perhaps even as we describe it in Birchas Hamazon as “a desirable, good, and spacious land?”

Perhaps they would all have joined Koleiv in a pilgrimage to Chevron to report to the Avos, “We are coming. Hashem redeemed us from Mitzrayim and brought us, your descendants, through the desert to the land that Hashem promised that he would give to us.” Then they would excitedly add, “We are here! Hashem is about to fulfill His promise to you.”

Yes, I think things would have been very different had they checked in with the pillars of the intended destination. But they didn't. Instead, they stayed busy with their task without recognizing its purpose — To build a robust Jewish commonwealth on the land promised to their ancestors. As a result, they wept when they should have rejoiced, missing out on their destination.

Just as the Miraglim had both a task and a destination, so in our personal lives there are tasks and also a destination that we hope to reach by doing those tasks. It is beneficial for us to take time periodically from the tasks to taste the destination. This way we stay on track as we connect with the reason for the tasks.

For example, Hashem gave us the gift of Shabbos — a taste of the world to come — so that we take a break from the tasks of life and have a day to focus on our destination. We devote ourselves to Torah, Tefila, and our relationships, with Hashem and with our families and communities. In fact, we make space to savor the taste of the destination by striving to fulfill the

directive, “To see all our work as if it is completed.” Jobs, money, and logistics are not on our minds. One day each week we take time off from the tasks to taste the destination.

I once had the opportunity to attend the HASC pre-concert dinner. The presentations were precious. It was truly a memorable event recognizing the *Tzelem Elokim* of people with special needs. Following the dinner, we headed into the concert hall, joined by thousands who came to attend the concert. The flow of people was steady; the pre-concert excitement was palpable. Suddenly the flow into the concert hall halted. Surprised at how abruptly things had stopped, we tried to get a glimpse of what was up ahead holding things up. What we saw was a simple sight. A gentleman with special needs was being wheeled in a wheelchair, and everyone was politely holding back to give space. It was a simple moment, but an awesome one as well. This is what it was all about. The concert itself was a task to raise money. But the destination was to be more sensitive, more aware — To stop our busyness, to pause and be extra courteous to the *Tzelem Elokim* that is within each of us. It was refreshing to take a few moments from focusing on the task of the concert and focus on the destination.

It is common for us, devoted as we are, to be engaged in the tasks of daily life. Periodically, Hashem thrusts upon us opportunities (aka disturbances) that enable us to connect for a few moments with the purpose, the destination, of everything that we do. It might be a child who needs attention or a Tzedaka collector who needs our time and money. Pausing from the task to help is greatness and it makes sure that we stay on track in all that we do.

On one level, the Miraglim were simply too focused on the task to remember the destination. Had they taken a moment to visit special places and see themselves walking the fields where the Avos had walked, things could have been very different.

We face the same challenge. The tasks we are engaged in are real and constant. But Hashem builds in moments — sometimes as gifts, like Shabbos, sometimes as interruptions — that pull us back to the destination. The key is to recognize them when they come and not be so busy with the task that we miss out on the destination.

#### **For Family Discussion:**

- The HASC moment was an interruption — an unplanned pause. Do you tend to experience those kinds of interruptions as annoying or as opportunities? What makes the difference?
- If the Miraglim had visited Chevron or stood at the place of the Akeida, do you think it would actually have changed their report? Why or why not?

With best wishes for a wonderful Shabbos!

\* Rabbi Mordechai Rhine is a certified mediator and coach with Rabbinic experience of more than 20 years. Based in Maryland, he provides services internationally via Zoom. He is the Director of TEACH613: Building Torah Communities, One family at a Time, and the founder of CARE Mediation, focused on Marriage/ Shalom Bayis and personal coaching. To reach Rabbi Rhine, his websites are [www.care-mediation.com](http://www.care-mediation.com) and [www.teach613.org](http://www.teach613.org); his email is [RMRhine@gmail.com](mailto:RMRhine@gmail.com).  
**For information or to join any Torah613 classes, or to help sponsor his Torah insights, contact Rabbi Rhine.**

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## **Shelach – Actualized by Action**

By Rabbi Yehoshua Singer

This week’s parsha begins with the painful episode of the spies. As our ancestors approached the Promised Land, they began their preparations by sending forth some of the greatest men in the generation to spy out the land. The official reason for sending the spies was to assess the nature of the war they would be fighting – the strength of the nations currently living in Israel, as well as to bring back a first-hand report of just how wonderful the Promised Land truly was.

Unfortunately, the mission did not go as planned. When they returned, ten out of the twelve spies reported that Israel was simply too dangerous a land to conquer. Rather than bringing back the maps and information necessary to begin planning

their attack, they brought back a message of fear and danger. They even sought to undermine the excitement about the land of Israel, reporting that it was an unhealthy land where it is hard to survive, “a land that consumes its inhabitants.” (Bamidbar 13:32)

Tragically, despite the efforts of the remaining two spies, Yehoshua and Calev, the nation was swayed by these negative reports. The night after they returned, the Torah describes how the entire nation raised their voices in lament and cried in their tents that night. The excitement of entering Israel gave way to panic.

The Ramba”n (Bamidbar 13:2) explains that the sin of the spies and of the nation was far deeper than simple lack of faith. This incident took place just over a year after leaving Egypt and receiving the Torah. The Exodus from Egypt was preceded by a year of open miracles in which Hashem repeatedly distinguished between Jew and Egyptian, with the plagues afflicting Egyptians wherever they went, yet never affecting any Jews. After the Exodus, they experienced the Splitting of the Sea and the drowning of their tormentors. A few weeks later they stood at the foot of Mount Sinai as G-d entered into an eternal pact with the Jewish people, promising that we will always be His nation in this world, enjoying a unique, treasured status. They lived for a year on manna, a spiritual food that fell from Heaven, drank water which flowed from a rock, and were protected from the elements by Heavenly clouds. After all this how could they dare to accuse G-d of bringing them to a land that would kill them? The Ramba”n adds that even sending spies to plan battle tactics was inappropriate. They were being led by the Clouds of Glory. When the time came to enter into the land, Hashem would continue guiding their path. Why should they need to send spies and make plans for themselves?

The next morning, things got even worse. The nation gathered before Moshe and Aharon and had the audacity to bemoan that they didn’t die in Egypt or in the desert! The sentiment spread and sought to appoint a leader to guide them back to Egypt! At this point, Moshe and Aharon “fell on their faces before the nation.” (Bamidbar 14:2-5) The Ramba”n (Bamidbar 14:5) explains that Moshe and Aharon were falling in supplication - begging the nation, “please my brothers don’t become evil, so this shouldn’t be a hindrance for you.”

Despite the grave error of lacking faith which the Ramba”n described, they were not yet evil. It was only when they actively prepared to return to Egypt that they were “becoming evil.” It requires action to become evil. Questioning, worrying, even crying out of despair in and of themselves won’t ruin a person. It is only once we act on those feelings and actualize them that the individual is truly, deeply changed.

If our sinful actions have a unique ability to mold us and damage us, then how much more so do our mitzvos have the capacity to raise us up and purify us. Each act of kindness and goodness concretizes the goodness within us and sets us on a path towards even more greatness.

We are blessed to have endless mitzvah opportunities. Each one is a gift, a chance to solidify our intent and direct our path in life. It is only through mitzvah actions that we can truly and deeply change who we are.

\* Rav at Sha'arei Tefilla and the co-founder of the RI Torah Network in Providence, Rhode Island. For several years, Rabbi Singer was the Rabbi at Am HaTorah Congregation in Bethesda, MD. The RI Torah Network included this Dvar Torah in a booklet for Shavuot 5786. Rabbi Singer’s recent Devrei Torah normally come as podcasts rather than texts.

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## A Crisis in Trust in BeMidbar

By Rabbi Haim Ovadia \*

[The material from Shelach is part four of a multi-section discussion by Rabbi Ovadia]

The story of the scouts is presented in the Torah in two versions, which seem to be incompatible. This chart lists the most salient differences.

BeMidbar	Devarim
God tells Moshe to send the scouts.	The mission is requested by the people.

The mission is to gather information. There is no specific mention of how the information will be used.	The mission is strategic. The scouts are asked to come back with a plan for the route to take and cities to attack.
The members of the delegation are called scouts, from the Hebrew root רָוַח.	The members of the delegation are called spies, from the Hebrew root רָפָח.
The scouts are described as leaders and chieftains, and they are mentioned by name.	They are described only as “one person of each tribe.”
The scouts first deliver information, with only a hint of difficulty, conveyed by the word אָפֹס – <i>however</i> (13:28). After the Israelites react negatively, the scouts add that it is an impossible mission. After the decree is given that they will spend 40 years in the desert, the scouts instigate the people again.	The scouts return with a short and positive message: the land which God is giving us is very good. They refer to the land as already being given.
In summary: the voices in the conversation from the moment the scouts return are: scouts; Israelites (insinuated); Caleb; Scouts; Israelites; Yehoshua and Caleb; Israelites; God; Moshe; God; God; Scouts.	In summary: the voices in the conversation from the moment the scouts return are: scouts; Israelites; Moshe; God.

The commentators offer many explanations to the discrepancies between the two narratives, and it seems that the common thread to all of them is that in Devarim Moshe tells the story in retrospect, from his perspective. The narrative in BeMidbar unfolds as events are taking place, and reading that narrative one might have believed that the mounting opposition among the people regarding the conquest of Canaan was a result of an ongoing debate between the people, the scouts, Caleb and Yehoshua, Moshe and God. The debate in BeMidbar is prolonged and multilayered, while in Devarim almost no discussion is present. In retrospect, Moshe tells the people that they never intended to accomplish their journey and enter the land of Canaan, and that it was not the report of the scouts that made them take the final decision.

In BeMidbar, the people sent to Canaan are described as scouts sent to gather general information, they hold prestigious positions, and they are commissioned by God. In Devarim, it is understood that the mission, even if ordered by God, was necessary because the Israelites wanted it. They wanted spies and not scouts, and they wanted strategic information, so they could insist on returning to Egypt. In retrospect, it is understood that the chieftains sent to Canaan did not deserve the honor bestowed upon them, and they are referred to in Devarim as ordinary people.

This is just a cursory interpretation, and the readers are encouraged to compare the two narratives in depth and research the commentators. It is also recommended to chart the order in which the events in the desert are described in Devarim, in order to feel the perspective of Moshe as he speaks of those events.

I would like to highlight several elements of the story, especially in relation to the overarching story line of loss in trust in the leadership.

Loss of trust in oneself: a lot was written on verse 13:33: *“in comparison to the giants we seemed to ourselves as grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them.”* Losing trust in ones ability to succeed will turn him against parents, educators, and advisors. The rebellion might be active and aggressive, or it might be expressed through passive, indifferent behavior. When such feelings are experienced by a group of people, they are exponentially more powerful and spread like waves throughout the group.

Why does God care what people say?: in verses 14:13-18, Moshe argues that God should spare the Israelites, because their annihilation would cause other nations to say that God was unable to bring them to Canaan. A similar argument is

used following the sin of the Golden Calf, and we wonder why is it a valid one when used to convince God, since after all God is immutable. The answer is that Moshe is not speaking of God's image but of the greater goal of the Torah. That goal is mentioned when God chooses Abraham and again before Mattan Torah, the Giving of the Law on Mount Sinai – and it is about spreading the message of the Torah to the whole world. Though any argument with God would seem futile, Moshe argues that destroying the Israelites will foil the general goal because no nation will be willing to become God's nation. (Have in mind that any discussion of the goals of the Torah or of God is limited to our perspective of events, and is phrased in the Torah in terms palatable to us.)

What you care for will succeed: amidst the tragic events of the scouts' rebellion there is one positive moment. In verse 14:31 God tells the Israelites that their children, whom they thought would be slaughtered by the enemy's sword, will merit entering Canaan and settling in it. He is not telling them that to rub salt in their wounds, but to send the message that when you deeply care about something, there are chances it is going to succeed. The Israelites [ed: generation of the Exodus] did not care for independence or for Canaan, and therefore lost both, but they did care deeply about their children, and for that reason their children succeeded in the mission.

The importance of family: this brings us to another key element of BeMidbar's trust crisis narrative. A nation is strongest when its members feel as family to each other. A family where siblings, spouses, and parents and children do not trust each other will fall into disarray and so will the nation. Let us go back to chapter 11 and look at references to familial relationships:

11:10: families; 11:12: pregnancy, delivery, wet nurse, suckling, fathers; 12:1: wife (spoken of by in-laws); 12:12: fetus emerging from the mother's womb; 12:14: father; 14:13: wives and children; 14:31: children; 14:33: sons;

Don't kill the messenger: The story of the scouts also drives home the point that though the people mostly directed their criticism at Moshe and Aharon, and even tried to stone them, they were actually rebelling against God. That idea is mentioned in the following verses:

14:3: why does God bring us to that land to be killed by the sword...

14:9: [Yehoshua and Caleb urge the people:] do not rebel against God...

14:11: God tells Moshe that the people blaspheme Him and have no faith in Him, despite all the miracles they have seen.

14:13-19: Moshe's argument revolves around the need to establish faith in God.

14:22: God speaks of the people who try Him.

14:26: [God said:] until when will this evil congregation complain against Me... I have heard their complaints against Me...

14:35: The people congregated against God.

**Devrei Torah from Rabbi Ovadia this year come from an unpublished draft of his forthcoming book on Tanach, which Rabbi Ovadia, who has generously shared with our readers. Rabbi Ovadia reserves all copyright rights to this material.**

\* Judaic faculty, Ramaz High School, New York; also Torah VeAhava. Until recently, Rabbi, Beth Sholom Sephardic Minyan (Potomac, MD). Faculty member, AJRCA non-denominational rabbinical school). **Many of Rabbi Ovadia's Devrei Torah are now available on Sefaria: <https://www.sefaria.org/profile/haim-ovadia?tab=sheets>** . The Sefaria

articles include Hebrew text, which I must delete because of issues changing software formats. Rabbi Ovadia retains all rights (copyright) to this and all other Devrei Torah that he permits me to share.

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## **A Bissel of Torah from a Tiny Jewish Community**

By Rabbi Natanel Kaszovitz \*

Auckland, New Zealand Hebrew Congregation \*\*

There are ups and downs in life, good days and bad days, for everyone but especially for us as the Jewish people.

There have been times when Israel felt like the safest place in the world to be a Jew, and there have been times when Jews living in the Diaspora were afraid even to visit. Throughout our history, we have found many reasons not to make aliyah: economics, security, politics, family, and countless others.

In this week's parsha, we read about the spies who attempted to convince the nation that they should not enter the Land of Israel. They saw the challenges, the dangers, and the obstacles, and concluded that it could not be done. (On Shabbat, we will discuss some of the deeper reasons behind their mistake.)

But two spies stood against the crowd: Kalev and Yehoshua, the future leaders of the Jewish people. Looking at the very same land, they proclaimed:

*"Tovah ha'aretz me'od me'od" — "The land is very, very good."*

Their message was not that there were no challenges. They saw the giants, the fortified cities, and the difficulties. Their message was that despite all of those challenges, this was still our land.

I often explain this through a Midrash. The Jewish people are like fish, and Eretz Yisrael is our water. There may be sharks in the water. There may be fishermen on the shore. There may even be pollution and oil spills. But outside the water, a fish simply cannot thrive.

For over 2,000 years, we have lived as an exiled people spread across the world. We have built communities, schools, synagogues, and families in every corner of the globe. Yet we must never forget what Kalev and Yehoshua taught us:

*"Tovah ha'aretz me'od me'od."*: The Land of Israel is very, very good.

Not because it is perfect. Not because it is easy. But because it is home.

B'Ahavat Yisrael  
Rabbi Netanel

[Editor's note: If you became Rabbi of the only synagogue in a small, isolated Jewish community, at what level would you direct your Shabbat message for the congregation?]

### **Roots Project Worldwide Competition**

Mazal Tov to Eleanor Shenkin and Kadimah school! This week, Eleanor placed 4th out of thousands of entries from 31 countries in a global competition hosted by the ANU Museum of the Jewish People in Tel Aviv.

\* Rabbi Kaszovitz, an Israeli ordained at Ohr Torah Stone, previously served as Rabbi in Nairobi, Kenya. He became Rabbi of Auckland Hebrew Congregation in September 2025. Rabbi Moshe Rube, whose remarks I previously posted in this space, is in the process of starting a new Rabbinic position in Australia. Rabbi Rube is waiting for his visa to enter

Australia, when he will be able to start his new position. I plan to use this space to include messages from Rabbi Kaszovitz and Rabbi Rube going forward.

\*\* Rabbi Kaszovitz is now posting his Devrei Torah and classes on You Tube: <https://youtube.com/c/TheNairobisher> .

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## **Rav Kook Torah**

### **Shlach: The Third Passage of Shema**

Every evening and morning, we say the Shema, Judaism's supreme declaration of monotheistic faith. In the first passage, we accept upon ourselves the yoke of God's sovereignty. And in the second, we accept God's commandments.

Interestingly, the Sages added a third paragraph to the Shema — the passage commanding us to wear tzitzit (tassels) on the corners of our garments (Num. 15:37-41). Why did they decide to add this particular paragraph, out of the entire Torah, to the central prayer of Judaism?

#### **Six Themes**

The Talmud in Berakhot 12b explains that the passage of tzitzit contains not one, but six major themes:

The mitzvah of wearing tzitzit on our garments;

The Exodus ("I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt");

Accepting the mitzvot ("You will thus remember and keep all of My commandments");

Resisting heresy ("You will not stray after your hearts");

Refraining from immoral and sinful thoughts ("and after your eyes");

Eschewing idolatry ("which have led you astray").

Is there a common motif to these six themes? Most are indeed fundamental concepts of Judaism, but what is so special about the mitzvah of tzitzit, more than the other 612 commandments?

#### **Spiritual Focus**

This mitzvah in fact does contain a fundamental message. It touches on the basic issues of life: how do we realize our spiritual potential? How can we truly fulfill ourselves as human beings?

As Maimonides wryly noted, the philosophers composed numerous volumes and entire libraries trying to answer these questions. Despite their efforts, they failed to exhaust the topic. The Talmudic sages, on the other hand, succeeded in encompassing the subject by revealing its essence in one pithy statement:

*Let all your deeds be for the sake of Heaven (Avot 2:12).*

Human perfection is attained by establishing a worthwhile spiritual goal for all of our efforts and activities in life. Once we have set our spiritual focus, we need to direct all of our aspirations, wants and actions according to that objective. Then we will be complete in all aspects and levels of our existence.

This is the message of tzitzit. The sky-blue techelet thread reminds us of the heavens and the Throne of Glory. The soul's external expressions — character traits, emotions and actions — are like a garment worn on the outside, over the body. We need to connect all of these outer manifestations to our inner spiritual goal, our tachlit, in the same way that we tie our outer clothes with the special thread of techelet.

The Exodus from Egyptian bondage expands on this theme. We are no longer slaves, subjected to physical and moral repression. A slave cannot set goals for his life and actions — they are not under his control. But we were liberated from slavery, are we free to elevate ourselves and aspire towards our spiritual calling.

The acceptance of practical mitzvot perpetuates the same message. All of our detailed actions should connect with our overall objective. Thus, we attain completion in all aspects of our existence: our intellect, emotions and conduct.

### **Avoiding the Pitfalls**

While the first three themes in the passage of tzitzit teach us how to fulfill the maxim, "*Let all of your deeds be for the sake of Heaven,*" the last three themes deal with avoiding three obstacles to this guideline.

The first pitfall is heresy. The fear of all-inclusive commitment, the desire to avoid moral responsibilities, can lead to denial of God or His Oneness. The path of heresy means abandoning elevated goals and rejecting ethical aspirations. Without a comprehensive objective and direction, the soul naturally seeks some other occupation. Lacking an overriding goal, the soul is tossed and flung like flotsam in the ocean, pulled by any internal or external lure. This leads to the second pitfall: attraction to base and corrupt actions.

In the end, however, a self-indulgent lifestyle leaves the soul with feelings of horrible emptiness. The soul recognizes that a life without meaning is a contradiction to its very essence. But since it has already lost its rational beacon by rejecting the light of truth, the soul seeks purpose and meaning in foreign cultures. It tries to find spiritual sustenance in broken cisterns, in idolatrous worship.

Thus, we see that this short passage includes the fundamental themes of Judaism. It describes that which gives our lives meaning and direction, and the major obstacles that can lead the soul astray. It is a fitting conclusion to our acceptance of God's kingship in the Shema prayer.

*(Gold from the Land of Israel. Adapted from Ein Eyah vol. I, pp. 70-71.)*

<https://ravkooktorah.org/shlach64>

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### **Shelach Lecha: Two Kinds of Fear (5776, 5783)**

By Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l, Former UK Chief Rabbi \*

One of the most powerful addresses I ever heard was given by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, on this week's parsha: the story of the spies. For me, it was nothing less than life changing.

He asked the obvious questions. How could ten of the spies have come back with a demoralising, defeatist report? How could they say, we cannot win, the people are stronger than us, their cities are well fortified, they are giants and we are grasshoppers?

They had seen with their own eyes how God had sent a series of plagues that brought Egypt, the strongest and longest-lived of all the empires of the ancient world, to its knees. They had seen the Egyptian army with its cutting-edge military technology, the horse-drawn chariot, drown in the Reed Sea while the Israelites passed through it on dry land. Egypt was far stronger than the Canaanites, Perizzites, Jebusites and other minor kingdoms that they would have to confront in conquering the land. Nor was this an ancient memory. It had happened not much more than a year before.

What is more, they already knew that, far from being giants confronting grasshoppers, the people of the land were terrified of the Israelites. They had said so themselves in the course of singing the Song at the Sea:

*The peoples have heard; they tremble;*

*Pangs have seized the inhabitants of Philistia.  
Now are the chiefs of Edom dismayed;  
Trembling seizes the leaders of Moab;  
All the inhabitants of Canaan have melted away.  
Terror and dread fall upon them;  
Because of the greatness of your arm, they are still as a stone. Ex. 15:14-16*

The people of the land were afraid of the Israelites. Why then were the spies afraid of them?

What is more, continued the Rebbe, the spies were not people plucked at random from among the population. The Torah states that they were *“all of them men who were heads of the people of Israel.”* They were leaders. They were not people given lightly to fear.

The questions are straightforward, but the answer the Rebbe gave was utterly unexpected. **The spies were not afraid of failure, he said. They were afraid of success.** [emphasis added]

What was their situation now? They were eating manna from heaven. They were drinking water from a miraculous well. They were surrounded by Clouds of Glory. They were camped around the Sanctuary. They were in continuous contact with the Shechinah. Never had a people lived so close to God.

What would be their situation if they entered the land? They would have to fight battles, maintain an army, create an economy, farm the land, worry about whether there would be enough rain to produce a crop, and all the other thousand distractions that come from living in the world. What would happen to their closeness to God? They would be preoccupied with mundane and material pursuits. Here they could spend their entire lives learning Torah, lit by the radiance of the Divine. There they would be no more than one more nation in a world of nations, with the same kind of economic, social and political problems that every nation has to deal with.

The spies were not afraid of failure. They were afraid of success. Their mistake was the mistake of very holy men. They wanted to spend their lives in the closest possible proximity to God. What they did not understand was that God seeks, in the Hasidic phrase, *“a dwelling in the lower worlds.”* **One of the great differences between Judaism and other religions is that while others seek to lift people to heaven, Judaism seeks to bring heaven down to earth.** [emphasis added]

Much of Torah is about things not conventionally seen as religious at all: labour relations, agriculture, welfare provisions, loans and debts, land ownership and so on. It is not difficult to have an intense religious experience in the desert, or in a monastic retreat, or in an ashram. Most religions have holy places and holy people who live far removed from the stresses and strains of everyday life. There was one such Jewish sect in Qumran, known to us through the Dead Sea Scrolls, and there were certainly others. About this there is nothing unusual at all.

But that is not the Jewish project, the Jewish mission. **God wanted the Israelites to create a model society where human beings were not treated as slaves, where rulers were not worshipped as demigods, where human dignity was respected, where law was impartially administered to rich and poor alike, where no one was destitute, no one was abandoned to isolation, no one was above the law and no realm of life was a morality-free zone. That requires a society, and a society needs a land. It requires an economy, an army, fields and flocks, labour and enterprise. All these, in Judaism, become ways of bringing the Shechinah into the shared spaces of our collective life.** [emphasis added]

The spies feared success, not failure. It was the mistake of deeply religious men. But it was a mistake.

That is the spiritual challenge of the greatest event in two thousand years of Jewish history: the return of Jews to the land and state of Israel. Perhaps never before and never since has there been a political movement accompanied by so many dreams as Zionism. For some it was the fulfillment of prophetic visions, for others the secular achievement of people who had decided to take history into their own hands. Some saw it as a Tolstoy-like reconnection with land and soil, others a

Nietzschean assertion of will and power. Some saw it as a refuge from European antisemitism, others as the first flowering of messianic redemption. Every Zionist thinker had his or her version of utopia, and to a remarkable degree they all came to pass.

But Israel always was something simpler and more basic. Jews have known virtually every fate and circumstance between tragedy and triumph in the almost four thousand years of their history, and they have lived in almost every land on earth. But in all that time there only ever was one place where they could do what they were called on to do from the dawn of their history: to build their own society in accord with their highest ideals, a society that would be different from their neighbours and become a role model of how a society, an economy, an educational system and the administration of welfare could become vehicles for bringing the Divine presence down to earth.

It is not difficult to find God in the wilderness, if you do not eat from the labour of your hands and if you rely on God to fight your battles for you. Ten of the spies, according to the Rebbe, sought to live that way forever. But that, suggested the Rebbe, is not what God wants from us. He wants us to engage with the world. He wants us to heal the sick, feed the hungry, fight injustice with all the power of law, and combat ignorance with universal education. He wants us to show what it is to love the neighbour and the stranger, and say, with Rabbi Akiva, *“Beloved is humanity because we are each created in God’s image.”*

Jewish spirituality lives in the midst of life itself, the life of society and its institutions. To create it we have to battle with two kinds of fear: fear of failure, and fear of success. Fear of failure is common; fear of success is rarer but no less debilitating. Both come from the reluctance to take risks. Faith is the courage to take risks. It is not certainty; it is the ability to live with uncertainty. It is the ability to hear God saying to us as He said to Abraham, *“Walk on ahead of Me”* (Gen. 17:1).

The Rebbe lived what he taught. He sent emissaries out to virtually every place on earth where there were Jews. In so doing, he transformed Jewish life. He knew he was asking his followers to take risks, by going to places where the whole environment would be challenging in many ways, but he had faith in them and in God and in the Jewish mission whose place is in the public square where we share our faith with others and do so in deeply practical ways.

It is challenging to leave the desert and go out into the world with all its trials and temptations, but that is where God wants us to be, bringing His spirit to the way we run an economy, a welfare system, a judiciary, a health service, and an army, healing some of the wounds of the world and bringing, to places often shrouded in darkness, fragments of Divine light.

#### **Around the Shabbat Table:**

[1] What are the challenges of staying connected to God while living in the “real world”?

[2] Why might God ask us to live this harder life?

[3] How can we “bring heaven down to earth”?

Note: because Likutei Torah and the Internet Parsha Sheet, both attached by E-mail, normally include the two most recent Devrei Torah by Rabbi Sacks, I normally select an earlier Devar. Footnotes have not been preserved for this Dvar Torah.

<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/shelach-lecha/two-kinds-of-fear/>

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## **Meraglim, Mossad, and Military Might**

By Elchonon Morozow \*

The world looked on in awe as Israel began its miraculous campaign against the Iranian threat. Within hours, Iran’s military leadership and nuclear scientists were eliminated, and many of its missiles and launchers decimated.

The Mossad spied for years. IDF and IAF trained for months. The advance preparation is unimaginable.

And so is the alternative.

Where would we be if this operation hadn't taken place? If Iran was still marching full speed ahead toward nuclear weaponry? If they were smashing out ballistic missiles by the thousand? As harsh as the situation is now — and thank the Almighty for His constant miracles — without this operation, we would be in deep, deep trouble.

I can't help drawing a parallel to another operation, one we read about in this week's Torah portion: Spies, victory, conquest.

Who: the 12 Spies Moses sent. Their task: Scout out the Holy Land. Assess the weaknesses of the Canaanites and determine the best way to victory.

Only in that operation, the result wasn't as dazzling. The spies came back with negative reports: *"We can't do it. Mission impossible."*

The consequences? A tragedy. Forty years in the desert. The passing of an entire generation.

If not for this blunder, we're told, the Jewish people would have marched into the Land of Israel with the Final Redemption. Thousands of years of darkness, exile, trials and tribulations throughout our history would have never come to pass.

But the Spies made a fatal error. In their mission to scout out the land, they were tasked with a basic question: How? How should we conquer? What is the best way?

But instead, they asked if. Is it possible? Can we really succeed? And that was their failure.

But the story of the Spies is more than just history. The Torah tells us the story to teach each of us a lesson that remains applicable today in 2025.

Every person is given a mission, assigned by the One Above. How do we figure out our mission? We look for clues in our background and history, our talents and interests, and — of course — the needs we discover in the world.

It is up to us to work out the how, never the if.

G d Almighty doesn't expect without providing the tools we need to succeed.

The mission is timely and critical. The world relies on you to complete your part: We're marching toward the Final Redemption, a time when peace will finally reign, and you're at the front.

\* Melbourne, Australia.

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/6935805/jewish/Meraglim-Mossad-and-Military-Might.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/6935805/jewish/Meraglim-Mossad-and-Military-Might.htm)

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## **Shelach: A Day to Celebrate**

By Rabbi Yosef B. Friedman  
Kehot Publication Society

This Shabbos, the 28th of Sivan, marks eighty-five years since the Rebbe and Rebbetzin arrived on the hospitable shores

of the United States after narrowly escaping the Nazi onslaught in Europe.

That day marked a turning point in the history of American Jewry — and ultimately of Jewish life throughout the world. Soon after his arrival, the Rebbe began the sacred work of rebuilding and revitalizing post-war Judaism, laying the foundations for a renaissance of Jewish learning, observance, and outreach that continues to this day. [continues below]

## **Shelach: The Power of Resolve**

by Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky \* (5786)

By 29 Sivan 2449, the people had reached the border of the Land of Israel. Some of the people asked Moses to send spies into the land. Moses consulted with G-d, and G-d agreed to this plan.

*See what the land is, and the people who inhabit it: are they strong or weak? Are they few or many? (Num. 13:18)*

The phrase describing the people whom G-d had commanded the Jews to conquer — “*are they strong or weak*” — can be read, “*if they are strong, they will become weak*.” This teaches us that in our conquest of the materiality of the world, no matter how strong and overwhelming this materiality (our “enemy”) appears to us, if we dedicate ourselves fully to the battle, the enemy will sense this and be weakened by our resolve.

This is why Moses mentioned “*are they strong*” before “*are they weak*.” We have to be ready to oppose the powers of negativity no matter how formidable they appear, and then, they will be rendered weak, and much easier to subdue.

– From *Daily Wisdom* \*

[Rabbi Yosef Friedman’s story of 85 years ago continues]:

Among the institutions established during those formative years was the **Kehot Publication Society**, founded to bring the teachings of Torah and Chassidus to the broadest possible audience through the printed word.

Eighty-five years later, that mission continues. Kehot has published millions of volumes that have educated, inspired, and enriched Jewish lives around the globe. This weekly email is but a small reflection of that enduring legacy.

Please help sustain this vital work. In honor of this milestone, I invite you to support the Rebbe’s cherished publishing institution by making a contribution today. A particularly meaningful way to participate is through our sponsorship program, which allows you to dedicate a Kehot publication in honor or memory of a loved one.

\* Insights by **the Lubavitcher Rebbe** on the weekly parashat from Chabad’s *Daily Wisdom* by Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky.

Gut Shabbos,

Rabbi Yosef B. Friedman  
Kehot Publication Society  
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# Likutei Divrei Torah

Gleanings of Divrei Torah on Parashat Hashavuah  
via the Internet

Shabbat Shalom

Volume 32, Issue

Shabbat Parashat Shlach

5786 B"H

## Covenant and Conversation

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

### The Real World

The episode of the spies has rightly puzzled commentators throughout the centuries. How could they have got it so wrong? The land, they said, was as Moses had promised. It was indeed "flowing with milk and honey." But conquering it was impossible. "The people who live there are powerful, and the cities fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of the giant there... We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are... All the people we saw there are of great size. We saw the titans there... We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and so we seemed in theirs" (Num. 13:28-33).

They were terrified of the inhabitants of the land, and entirely failed to realise that the inhabitants were terrified of them. Rahab, the prostitute in Jericho, tells the spies sent by Joshua a generation later: "I know that the Lord has given you this land and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you ... our hearts melted in fear and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below" (Joshua 2:10-11).

The truth was the exact opposite of the spies' report. The inhabitants feared the Israelites more than the Israelites feared the inhabitants. We hear this at the start of the story of Bilaam:

"Now Balak son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites, and Moab was terrified because there were so many people. Indeed, Moab was filled with dread because of the Israelites." Num. 22:2-3

Earlier the Israelites themselves had sung at the Red Sea: "The people of Canaan will melt away; terror and dread will fall on them." Ex. 15:15-16

How then did the spies err so egregiously? Did they misinterpret what they saw? Did they lack faith in God? Did they – more likely – lack faith in themselves? Or was it simply, as Maimonides argues in *The Guide for the Perplexed*, that their fear was inevitable given their past history? They had spent most of their lives as slaves. Only recently had they acquired their freedom. They were not yet ready to fight a prolonged series of battles and

establish themselves as a free people in their own land. That would take a new generation, born in freedom. Humans change, but not that quickly (See *Guide for the Perplexed* III, 32).

Most of the commentators assume that the spies were guilty of a failure of nerve, or faith, or both. It is hard to read the text otherwise. However, in the Hassidic literature – from the Baal Shem Tov to R. Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger (Sefat Emet) to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson – an entirely different line of interpretation emerged, reading the text against the grain to dramatic effect so that it remains relevant and powerful today. According to their interpretation, the spies were well-intentioned. They were, after all, "princes, chieftains, leaders" (Num. 13:2-3). They did not doubt that Israel could win its battles with the inhabitants of the land. They did not fear failure; they feared success. Their concern was not physical but spiritual. They did not want to leave the wilderness. They did not want to become just another nation among the nations of the earth. They did not want to lose their unique relationship with God in the reverberating silence of the desert, far removed from civilisation and its discontents.

Here they were close to God, closer than any generation before or since. He was a palpable presence in the Sanctuary in their midst, and in the Clouds of Glory that surrounded them. Here His people ate manna from heaven and water from the rock and experienced miracles daily. So long as they stayed in the desert under God's sheltering canopy, they did not need to plough the earth, plant seeds, gather harvests, defend a country, run an economy, maintain a welfare system, or shoulder any of the other earthly burdens and distractions that take peoples' minds away from the Divine.

Here, in no-man's-land, in liminal space, suspended between past and future, they were able to live with a simplicity and directness of encounter they could not hope to find once they had re-entered the gravitational pull of everyday life in the material world. Paradoxically, since a desert is normally the exact opposite of a garden, the wilderness was the Israelites' Eden. Here they were as close to God as were the first humans before their loss of innocence.

If that comparison is too discordant, recall that Hosea and Jeremiah both compared the

wilderness to a honeymoon. Hosea said in the name of God: "I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her" (Hos. 2:16), implying that in the future God would take the people back there to celebrate a second honeymoon. Jeremiah said in God's name, "I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the wilderness, through a land not sown" (Jer. 2:2). For both prophets, the wilderness years were the time of the first love between God and the Israelites. That is what the spies did not want to leave.

Clearly this interpretation is not the plain sense of the narrative, but we should not dismiss it on that account. It is, as it were, a psychoanalytical reading, an account of the unconscious mindset of the spies. They did not want to let go of the intimacy and innocence of childhood and enter the adult world. Sometimes it is hard for parents to let go of their children; at others it is the other way round. But there must be a measure of separation if children are to become responsible adults. Ultimately the spies feared freedom and its responsibilities.

But that is what Torah is about. Judaism is not a religion of monastic retreat from the world. It is supremely a religion of engagement with the world. The Torah is a template for the construction of a society with all its gritty details: laws of warfare and welfare, harvests and livestock, loans and employer-employee relationships, the code of a nation in its land, part of the real world of politics and economics, yet somehow pointing to a better world where justice and compassion, love of the neighbour and stranger, are not remote ideals but part of the texture of everyday life. God chose Israel to make His presence visible in the world, and that means that Israel must live in the world.

To be sure, the Jewish people were not without their desert-dwellers and ascetics. The Qumran sect known to us from the Dead Sea Scrolls was such a group. The Talmud speaks of R. Shimon bar Yochai in similar terms. Having lived for thirteen years in a cave, he could not bear to see people engaged in such earthly

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pursuits as ploughing a field. Maimonides speaks of people who live as hermits in the desert to escape the corruptions of society (Laws of ethical character, 6: 1; Eight Chapters, ch. 4). But these were the exceptions, not the rule. This is not the destiny of Israel, to live outside time and space in ashrams or monasteries as the world's recluses. Far from being the supreme height of faith, such a fear of freedom and its responsibilities is – according to both the Gerer and Lubavitcher Rebbe – the sin of the spies.

There is a voice within the tradition, most famously identified with R. Shimon bar Yochai, that regards engagement with the world as fundamentally incompatible with the heights of spirituality. But the mainstream held otherwise. "Torah study without an occupation will in the end fail and lead to sin" (Avot 2:2). "One who makes his mind up to study Torah and not to work but to live on charity, profanes the name of God, brings the Torah into contempt, extinguishes the light of religion, brings evil upon himself, and deprives himself of life hereafter" (Maimonides, Laws of Torah Study 3:10).

The spies did not want to contaminate Judaism by bringing it into contact with the real world. They sought the eternal childhood of God's protection and the endless honeymoon of His all-embracing love. There is something noble about this desire, but also something profoundly irresponsible that demoralised the people and provoked God's anger. For the Jewish project – the Torah as the constitution of the Jewish nation under the sovereignty of God – is about building a society in the land of Israel that so honours human dignity and freedom that it will one day lead the world to say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people" (Deut. 4:6).

The Jewish task is not to fear the real world but to enter and transform it. That is what the spies did not understand. Do we – Jews of faith – understand it even now?

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### **Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin**

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"And the Lord spoke to Moses saying 'send forth for yourself men to explore the land of Canaan...'" (Numbers 13:1-2)

The great sin of humanity was Adam's disregard of God's command not to eat the fruit of knowledge; the great sin of Israel was the Israelites' disregard of God's command to conquer the land of Israel. The result of both rebellious actions was Paradise lost; redemption unrealized.

A proper understanding of the sin of the scouts will serve to illuminate our true mission in the world, and the role played by Torah and the land of Israel in fulfilling that mission.

First, three questions: (1) If indeed the sending out of the spies was to result in such a disaster, why was it initially commanded by God? (2) Rashi links the sin of the scouts to the last incident of last week's Torah portion when Miriam slandered her brother Moses for sending away his wife Zipporah, for which she was punished by leprosy. What does the sin of the Scouts have to do with the sin of Miriam? (3) How is the commandment of the ritual fringes at the end of our portion connected to the sin of the scouts?

Rav Soloveitchik explained that Miriam was upset with Moses for divorcing Zipporah after the Revelation at Sinai, because she thought he was disobeying God's command to all of the Israelites to "return to their tents" (Deuteronomy 5:30); that is, to resume their usual sexual relationships. Miriam and Aaron both maintained that this command applied to everyone, including the prophets, because, as they both said, "Was it only to Moses that God communicated? Did he not communicate to us as well?" (Numbers 12:2)

But Miriam and Aaron were wrong. Moses is a qualitatively different prophet than they or any other prophets were or will be. God speaks to Moses "mouth to mouth... in a clear vision, not in riddles: he gazes upon the image of the Lord" (Numbers 12:6-8). And indeed, God Himself tells Moses not to return to his tent with the rest of Israel, but rather to express his unique prophetic status by always being "on call" to receive God's words: "Let the rest of the Israelites return to their tents and wives) but you (Moses) are to remain standing here with me..." (Deuteronomy 5:30; see Maimonides, Laws of the Foundations of Torah 7:6 and Avishai David, Discourses, Shelah, p.317).

Miriam did not recognize the uniqueness of Moses' prophecy, and the scouts did not recognize the uniqueness of the Land of Israel. The mission of Israel is to be God's witnesses (Isaiah 55); and God communicated His word to all of Israel at Sinai and through Israel (eventually) to the entire world.

But God still had an exclusively and uniquely intimate relationship with Moses. God loves the entire world and He created every human being from His womb (Job 31:15); but nevertheless, He enjoys an exclusive relationship with Israel – His witnesses, the carriers of His Torah.

Similarly, God's command, "you shall love your friend, created – like you – in the Divine Image, as you love yourself," (Leviticus 19:18) still allows for a unique and exclusive relationship between husband and wife.

## **Likutei Divrei Torah**

According to the Talmud, this emanates from the very same verse (BT Kiddushin 44a).

This combination of universal love and exclusive intimacy applies as well to the land of Israel. "The earth and its fullness belongs to the Lord" (Psalms 24:1), but there is a unique portion of the earth, the land of Israel, which must express the will of God in its very earth (shmitta), in its produce (tithes, pe'ah), in the teachings of peace and redemption for all humanity which will emanate from the Jerusalem Temple at the end of the days.

God told Moses to "explore" the land, not to spy it out (le'ragel). The Hebrew word used to explore is la-tur. Tur means to love, even to lust after, as we learn from the command of the ritual fringes (Num.15:37-41). Just as the Talmud teaches that a man must first see his bride before becoming engaged to her so that he may be certain that he loves her (BT Kiddushin 41a), so must Israel the people see and love Israel the land (even through the eyes of their agents, the tribal princes) before conquering it, before becoming engaged and wed to it. The desert generation did not understand God's command.

Our task is to make earth a sanctuary for God's Presence, so humanity will finally accept God's definition of good and evil rather than humanity's subjective and self-serving self-justification. Heaven kissed Earth when God uniquely informed Moses of His will, Heaven kissed Earth when God chose Israel as His agents; Heaven will kiss Earth eternally when Israel lives on its land and builds a sanctuary to encompass all of humanity and God together, "His house a House of Prayer for all nations" (Isaiah 56:7). We must strive for Paradise to be regained, for the great and sacred marriage between God and the world to be consummated.

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### **The Person in the Parsha Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb**

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#### **History Repeats Itself**

History repeats itself. I don't know the origin of that cliché, but I do know that our Sages held a similar point of view. "Ma'aseh avot siman labanim." What happened with ancestors is often a pattern that their descendants are destined to follow.

The repetitive nature of historical processes seems to be true in the stories of all nations and cultures. This is why historians such as Arnold Toynbee believed that history is cyclical, and they have been able to demonstrate that certain central issues recur repetitively in the history of the human race.

I remember reading for example, in one of Toynbee's books, of how the lives of many world leaders are characterized by patterns of

“withdrawal and return.” Thus, for example, Moses went through a period of withdrawal in the desert of Midian and then returned to Egypt to lead his people out of slavery. Similarly, great figures in the history of Greece, of Rome, of medieval Europe, and of modern Western civilization endured periods of their lives when they were in prison or in other forms of voluntary or forced solitude, and were thus in a stage of “withdrawal.” They then reemerged on the stage of leadership of their people, thereby entering a stage of “return”.

In this week’s Torah portion, Parshat Shelach, a pattern is laid down which has been, tragically, repeated all too frequently in the history of our people. I speak of the pattern whereby a major portion of the Jewish leadership is opposed to entering the Land of Israel. Only a small and courageous minority says, “We should go up at once, and possess it; for we are well able to overcome it.” (Numbers 13:30)

This week, we read of the episodes of the spies. These men were a select group of talented and presumably pious individuals. They conducted their risky mission as it was assigned to them. They were to explore the Promised Land and determine the nature of its inhabitants and the nature of the terrain. This was, simply put, a preparation for entering the land, conquering it, and settling it once and for all.

But 10 of the 12 returned totally discouraged. I would say, literally discouraged; that is, their courage was undone. They said, “We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we.”

This was only the first, but definitely not the last, time in Jewish history that Jewish leadership was internally torn apart by discord. The event described in this week’s Torah portion is but the first precedent of a recurring pattern in which a few heroic visionaries, Joshua and Caleb, can commit not only to enter the land themselves, but to inspire their followers to do so. But these visionaries, alas, are only part of the pattern. The other part are those leaders who are too cowardly, too cautious, or too blind to lead their people to do all that is necessary to enter and to possess the Holy Land.

During the Babylonian Exile, only unique individuals like Ezra and Nehemiah were made of the same stuff as Joshua and Caleb. And only a small remnant of the Babylonian Exile followed them and returned to the land. The great majority of Jews and the great majority of the Jewish leaders remained behind in Babylon, ignominiously.

So frequently over the ensuing centuries did history repeat itself. Every so often, a pitifully small group of Jews from Persia and Morocco, from France, from the bastions of Hasidism in the Ukraine or at the prodding of the Gaon of Vilna, follow the path advocated by Joshua and Caleb. Against all odds, they do return to the land. But the vast majority of their brethren, sometimes for practical reasons and sometimes for ideological ones, choose to remain behind in the Diaspora. They follow the path of the other ten spies.

Every portion in the Torah has relevance to contemporary Jewish life. This has been the theme of these columns which I have been writing now every week for years. But this week’s Torah portion is especially timely.

We live in an age where the ideal of return to Zion, which, after all, is the ideal preached so inspiringly by Joshua and Caleb, is beset by challenges from all sides.

We live in an age where the liberal intellectual community, composed to a great extent of fellow Jews, no longer accepts the ideal of a Jewish homeland for the Jewish people. At the very least, that community is willing to see the Holy Land shared by another people. And there are those of that community who totally delegitimize the notion of a return to Zion.

More troubling to me however are those elements of the observant religious community who are antagonistic to the enterprise of the Jewish people living as a sovereign nation in the land promised to us by the Almighty himself. I know full well that there are legitimate ideological views for or against religious Zionism, and I am certainly cognizant of the faults and flaws of the government of the State of Israel.

But I fail to see how anyone reading this week’s Torah portion cannot be impressed by its central messages: We left Egypt with a promise to inherit a specific land flowing with milk and honey. We had the opportunity to enter that land very soon after the Exodus. We failed to appreciate the opportunity and we lost it. True, we didn’t lose it entirely, and it was only postponed for forty years; the blink of an eye from the perspective of the millennia of Jewish history.

The tragedy of Parshat Shelach transcends this one incident described there. Rather, the narrative of Parshat Shelach establishes a pattern which is repeated too often during our subsequent history: The conflict between foresight and fear, between courage and cowardice, between true faith and weaker faith, becomes an eternal theme in our history down to this very day.

## Likutei Divrei Torah

I have come to learn, via the communications I receive from so many of you, dear readers, that you all listen quite attentively to each week’s Torah portion. I challenge you, especially this week, to listen attentively to the narrative of the spies. And when it is over, I am quite confident that you will see the message it sends to our generation. It is the message of Joshua and Caleb. It is the message that says to the entire congregation of the children of Israel:

“The land, which we passed through to spy it out, is an exceedingly good land. If the Lord delight in us, then He will bring us into this land and give it unto us – a land which flows with milk and honey. Only rebel not against the Lord, neither fear ye the people of the land; for they are bread for us; their defense is removed from over them, and the Lord is with us; fear them not.” (Numbers 14:7-9)

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### Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

#### The Difference Between the Spies Sent by Moshe and the Spies Sent by Yehoshua

Parshas Shelach contains the seminal event in Jewish history of the sending of spies and their subsequent negative report about Eretz Yisrael, and the resulting crying that night. Literally, Jewish history as we know it was set in motion because of this ill-fated mission. One of the famous questions that many commentaries focus on is that the Ribono shel Olam told Moshe Rabbeinu “Send out for yourself men who will spy out the Land of Canaan that I am giving to Bnei Yisrael” (Bamidbar 13:2). Apparently, the Ribono shel Olam not only acquiesced to this mission, He told Moshe to send out the meraglim (spies). Clearly, had the Ribono shel Olam wanted to stop the mission, He could have emphatically told Moshe not to send the meraglim. He didn’t do that.

So, what is the meaning of this? How could the Ribono shel Olam make sending the meraglim into a mitzvah, and then it turns into such a tragedy?

A famous and beautiful Medrash – the first Medrash Rabbah in Parshas Shelach – cites the pasuk in Yehoshua whereby Yehoshua sent out meraglim: “And Yehoshua bin Nun dispatched two men – spies – from Shittim, secretly saying ‘Go, observe the land and Yericho.’” (Yehosha 2:1) History repeats itself. This is the Haftorah of Parshas Shelach. When Bnei Yisroel were on the threshold of entering Eretz Yisrael, Yehosuha also sent out meraglim. He sent out two rather than twelve meraglim. They stayed in the house of Rachav Hazonah and they returned with their report about Yericho.

It is reasonable to assume that Yehoshua would have been very hesitant about sending out meraglim, based on what happened forty

years earlier with the first group of meraglim. Nevertheless, Yehoshua proceeded with this mission. Not only that, but it turned out well. Not only did it turn out well, but the Medrash says about the two meraglim whom Yehoshua sent out, "There is no one dearer before the Almighty than a messenger sent out to perform a mitzvah-mission who risks his life to successfully accomplish his mission." The Medrash cites the two messengers that Yehoshua bin Nun sent as a prime quintessential example of shluchoi mitzvah who risked their lives to successfully carry out their mitzvah-mission. The Medrash further records a Rabbinic tradition that those two meraglim were Pinchas and Kalev.

The Medrash continues: The pasuk says that Yehoshua sent out two meraglim "cheresh" ('secretly') which the Medrash takes to mean that the two spies disguised themselves as pottery salesmen so no one would realize they were meraglim. They would shout "Anyone who needs an earthenware pot (a play on the word 'cheres' as the letters 'shin' and 'sin' can be interchanged), come purchase from us."

The Gerer Rebbe, in his famous work Sefas Emes, writes that the Ribono shel Olam knew that the mission of the original meraglim sent by Moshe was fraught with danger. He saw the pitfalls and He realized what could happen. But the people wanted it and therefore He said, "I will give guidance so that they should be protected and not fall prey to the various temptations that they will face." What was this guidance and protection provided by the Ribono shel Olam? He made it into a mitzvah — Shelach lecha anashim!

The people wanted a spy mission. It could be done in one of two ways: They could do it on their own and the risk would be very high. But, instead, the Ribono shel Olam said "I will make it into a mitzvah. When people do something l'shem mitzvah, then the mitzvah protects them. Therefore, the potential danger associated with the sending of the meraglim would be mitigated.

The only problem was that in order to achieve that protection, the mitzvah must be done l'shem mitzvah! You need to do it because the Ribono shel Olam said so. However, these meraglim had their own agenda. They were not doing it because the Ribono shel Olam so commanded. They were doing it for their own purposes. On a basic level, perhaps it was the strategic thing to do. They were not "mevatel their da'as to the Da'as of the Ribono shel Olam" (negate their opinions to the Almighty's opinion). They did it because this was Military 101. You want to capture a city? You go scout it out and figure out the best place to attack.

Since they didn't do it for the sake of the mitzvah they did not receive the protection of that mitzvah. Thus, the Ribono shel Olam's "plan" "did not work." The Medrash contrasts this failed mission with the successful mission of Yehoshua's meraglim – that was performed by faithful messengers who were acting l'shem mitzvah and with mesiras nefesh l'shem mitzvah. The result was a successful mission.

The Sefas Emes makes a further observation. The Medrash comments on the word cheresh as teaching that Yehoshua's meraglim disguised themselves as pottery salesmen (selling klei cheres). One might ask why they were specifically selling pottery. Why not metal utensils? Why weren't they shoe salesmen? The Sefas Emes answers beautifully that klei cheres are unique in that they have no intrinsic value. They are made out of pottery. They break. They don't look good. They are porous. The whole purpose of an earthenware vessel is its mission. That is why the mefarshim say that klei cheres only become tameh from the inside. The outside of the earthenware vessel is valueless. Its whole purpose is to perform its function, which is to hold things.

This, according to the Medrash, is the symbolism of Pinchas and Kalev being pottery salesmen – they nullified themselves. There was no "me". There was no personal agenda of why they were doing this. "We are doing this only because the Ribono shel Olam sent us. This is our mission." Therefore, they were successful. There is nothing as dear to the Almighty as shluchoi mitzvah who are moser nefesh strictly and only for the sake of Hashem. In such cases, the inherent dangers are warded off by the fulfillment of the mitzvah and its associated zechus (merit).

The Sefas Emes concludes with a beautiful practical lesson: We are all shluchoi mitzvah. We are sent down to this earth with a mission. The Ribono shel Olam takes this neshama – this holy soul, which is a chelek Elo-ka mi'ma'al (portion of the L-rd above) and puts it into a body and says 'Here, go do your mission! 'We come down to this world, which is fraught with all sorts of danger and all sorts of temptations and pitfalls. It is very difficult for a person to maintain his kedusha and to maintain the status of being an erliche Yid (a Jew with integrity). Our challenge is to fulfill our mission, whatever that may be – whether butcher or baker or candlestick maker or lawyer or accountant or doctor or computer programmer or real estate broker or whatever – and to fulfill that mission completely l'shem shamayim. No matter what your mission may be, you will then have the protection of knowing that you are doing what the Ribono shel Olam wants you to do, and you are doing it solely for His sake.

## Likutei Divrei Torah

Not everyone is cut out to sit and learn all the time, but everyone is put here with a mission. If part of your mission is that you need to earn a living and you need to support your family and give tzedaka, etc., etc. – and you are doing that because it is what you perceive as your mission from the Ribono shel Olam, then "There is no one dearer before the Almighty than those who are shluchoi mitzvah – who faithfully, l'shem shamayim, carry out their mission."

In this way, the most mundane and quotidian activity in this world can be turned l'shem shamayim. Once you do this, you will gain the protection that the meraglim of Yehoshua merited. On the other hand, when the mission becomes "your mission" – whether it is to make money or to acquire power or whatever it may be – then the l'shem shamayim aspect will be lost, as was the case with the meraglim of Moshe, and the protection that the shlichus of the mitzvah should afford will be lost as well.

That is unfortunately what happens so often to so much of mankind. They forget the mission and the l'shem mitzvah of that mission and therefore they need to deal with the vagaries and the pitfalls that are inevitable in almost every person's life.

### Glass Half Full/Glass Half Empty

One of the lessons of the meraglim is that there are only two kinds of people in this world: The person who sees the glass half full and the person who sees the glass half empty. The ten meraglim who came back with the negative report were unfortunately people who saw the glass half empty. They brought back an extraordinarily large cluster of grapes, which could be viewed in one of two ways: What a lush land this is! It is going to be easy to farm. It is going to be easy to make a living here. Look at this wonderful place! Or, "The people must be giants because why on earth would the fruit be so big?"

When the Ribono shel Olam made it happen that the locals were busy burying the dead so that they would be preoccupied and not notice the meraglim, that too could be viewed in one of two ways: Look at the favor the Ribono shel Olam did for us!" Or, "Everyone drops dead over here. What kind of land is this?" This is the classic "glass half empty/glass half full" dichotomy.

I saw a famous story in the sefer Me'orei Ohr, describing an incident that occurred post-World War II, in one of the Displaced Persons camps. Rabbi Eliezer Silver, zt"l, who as part of the Vaad Hatzalah went around Europe in his U.S. Army uniform, came to Mauthausen, where there were Jewish Holocaust survivors.

He wanted to make a minyan and had nine people.

There was one Jewish survivor, who refused to join the minyan. Rabbi Silver tried to convince him to help make the prayer quorum. The fellow told Rabbi Silver “I will never again in my life daven or pick up a siddur.”

He explained his bitterness to the Rabbi: When he was in the concentration camp, there was a Jew who smuggled in a siddur, from which he would daven. He would then “rent” his siddur to the other prisoners of the concentration camp. The “rent” he charged to use his siddur was that those who wanted to daven had to give him their bread rations for the day. This bitter Jew told Rabbi Silver “When I saw a Jew that could stoop so low that he would make others forgo their meager rations in order to use his siddur, I decided that I don’t want to have anything to do with davening or with a siddur or with such a religion for the rest of my life.”

Rav Eliezer Silver said to this Jew: Why do you look at the Jew that rented out the siddur for a ration of bread? Why do you not, instead, look at the Jews who were willing to give up their rations of bread in order to daven? The bitter Jew conceded that Rav Silver was right. He decided to help complete the minyan.

Years later, this story was told over by the famous Nazi hunter, Simon Wiesenthal, at a conference of European rabbis, at which the rabbinical group presented Simon Wiesenthal with an award upon reaching his 91st birthday. When Wiesenthal finished the story, he delivered the punchline: “I was that bitter Jew whom Rabbi Silver convinced to join the minyan.”

This is one of the many lessons of the *meraglim*: The glass is either half full or half empty. In general, people who have the capacity to look at the glass as half full live happier lives. Other people don’t live as happy lives. This lesson is summed up by the *pasuk*: “...And you shall see the good of Yerushalayim all the days of your life.” (Tehillim 128:5)

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### **Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah**

#### **The Weight of ‘Nevertheless’ and Kafka’s Empty Bucket - Yoni Applebaum**

“And they told him, and said: ‘We came to the land to which you sent us, and indeed it flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. Nevertheless, the people who dwell in the land are fierce, and the cities are very greatly fortified, and we also saw the offspring of the giants there.’” (Bamidbar 13:27–28)

Many great minds have debated the nature of the spies’ sin, but that is not the focus of this article. Instead, I’ve chosen to linger on a single word amid the multitude of interpretations—especially because, at the time I was asked to write these few words, it happened to be the *yahrzeit* of Kafka. I believe the intersection of these two topics holds particularly interesting potential.

The Ramban notes that the spies did not lie—on the contrary: “Did he send them with the expectation they would testify falsely?” Indeed, the cities were large and fortified, and the land was abundant with fruit. So, what was their sin? The Ramban continues:

“But their wickedness lies in the word ‘efes’ [‘nevertheless’], which connotes nullification and impossibility—something entirely beyond human reach. As in the expressions: ‘He’afes lanetzach chasdo – Has His kindness ceased forever?’ (Tehillim 77:9) or ‘There is no one else—efes—besides God’ (Yeshayahu 45:14)[1]. And thus they said to him: the land is rich and flows with milk and honey, and its fruit is good—but it is impossible to conquer it, for the people are strong, the cities are very greatly fortified, and we even saw giants there.”

According to the Ramban, the critical issue lies in their use of the word *efes* — the shift away from the positive: the land is good — cloaked in a kind of cynicism, as if to say, “Yes, it’s very good — but there’s no chance we’ll ever reach it. It’s too good to be true.”

This rhetorical move — acknowledging the goodness only to negate it — is the essence of their sin. In effect, the spies hollowed out the profound seriousness of the true, ultimate claim — the very purpose of the journey — and turned it into something superficial. “Efes, poor us!” The good land? Suddenly, it no longer seems worth the trials of the desert — precisely because it is so good.

In his book *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, a collection of notes the Italian writer Italo Calvino prepared for a prestigious lecture series at an American university (the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures), he outlines six literary values to preserve for the coming millennium. The first is “lightness”—not as escapism, but as a response to the heaviness of reality: rigid institutions, habitual ways of thinking, or linguistic weight. For Calvino, lightness is a value to be preserved and cultivated.

And returning to the spies, we noted that the word *efes* is unique in that it takes a given reality and turns it on its head. From statements that are themselves positive and true, the spies slid into a grievous sin — a

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single word that renders the entire weight of their claim trivial. This is precisely the kind of paradox that Calvino identifies in Kafka[2] — though he sees it in a positive light. And I believe that perhaps even within our own tradition, we can find an intriguing use of this same rhetorical move, long before Kafka.

As we learned during our time in *yeshiva*, intertextual interpretations shine brilliantly in the Torah. Indeed, the phrase used by the spies — “the cities are great and fortified” — ultimately enjoys a rather successful afterlife, revealing something about the Torah’s own capacity to neutralize what many commentators initially viewed as a wholly negative and exclusive expression of the spies. In the book of *Devarim*, Moshe himself quotes the very claims that arose during the sin of the spies:

“Where are we going up? Our brothers have made our hearts melt, saying: ‘The people are greater and taller than we; the cities are great and fortified up to the heavens, and we also saw the children of the giants there.’”[3] “Hear, O Israel, today you are crossing the Jordan to dispossess nations greater and mightier than you, cities great and fortified up to the heavens.” (Devarim 1:28; 9:1)

The Ramban notices this and continues his commentary in *Bamidbar*:

“Behold, Moshe Rabbeinu spoke to their children in similar terms—and even exaggerated the strength of the people and the fortification of their cities, and the might of the giants, beyond what the spies had told their parents, as it is written: ‘Hear, O Israel, you are crossing the Jordan to dispossess nations greater and mightier than you, cities great and fortified up to the heavens, a great and tall people, children of the giants, whom you know and of whom you have heard—who can stand before the children of the giant?’ (Devarim 9:1–2). And if this was the spies’ crime, why would Moshe dishearten the hearts of their children as the spies did to their parents?”

The Ramban expresses surprise that Moshe would say these things to the current generation — one that did not belong to the generation of the spies — and even more so after opening with the words “Hear, O Israel.” His words seem to offer a defense of the spies — that they had spoken truthfully. The Ramban’s answer, as we saw above, once again focuses on the precise meaning of the word *efes*. It was not only permitted but necessary to report on the great and fortified cities. But the addition of the word *efes* — “however” or “nevertheless” — lies at the heart of the sin. That word is the very crux of the matter, and it is what enables Moshe to

later reuse the same claim without alteration — this time as a constructive teaching.[4]

Calvino mentions Kafka's[5] story that led him to reflect on this elusive quality of lightness and what it encapsulates. In the short story *The Bucket Rider*, a poor man goes out on a bitter winter night in search of coal. He rides an empty coal bucket, asks for help—and is rejected. The story ends on a surreal note, as the coal-seeker rides his empty bucket beyond the ice mountains. Kafka writes that the bucket is so light it carries the man upon it.

This bucket, writes Calvino, is not merely a metaphor. It is a symbol of wanting, of longing, and searching — lifting you precisely to that point where even the humblest request, a handful of coal, can no longer be fulfilled

He goes on to say: “Many of Kafka’s short stories are steeped in mystery, and this one especially. Perhaps Kafka simply meant to tell us that setting out to seek coal on a wartime winter night transforms the jostling of an empty bucket into the journey of a wandering knight, or a desert crossing atop a caravan, or flight upon a magic carpet.”

It is precisely the emptiness—the literal void of the bucket, the sparseness of the story stripped of description, light as a feather—that makes flight imaginable. It is lack that opens the door to new perspectives. This is the power Calvino finds in Kafka’s prose: a precise depiction of a given reality, no matter how grim, that enables a lighthearted glance at the heaviness of existence without being crushed by it. To say *efes*, and then discover how a fearful claim in the mouths of spies can become a confident one in the mouth of a prophet.

Let us conclude with Calvino’s own parting wish: “And so, riding our bucket, we head toward the new millennium—not hoping to find there anything other than what we bring with us. Lightness, for instance—which I have tried to evoke here.”

In the harsh reality of our times, we would do well to internalize the message embedded in the Sin of the Spies—and in the inner reworking of their words by the Torah itself. It teaches us the value of understanding things with a certain lightness—not indifference, not cynicism, but a true emptiness, a “God has left me” moment, from which a new faith may be born.

[1] “But only [efes] the word that I speak to you—that you shall speak (Bamidbar 22:35); Yeshayah 45:6: ‘For there is none [efes] besides Me; I am the Lord and there is no other.’ Think also of ‘There is none besides Him [efes zulado] from Aleinu Leshabe’ach, in the Pesukei Dezimra of the Shabbat prayer.”

[2] This stands in contrast to the analysis of another renowned author, David Foster Wallace, in his essay *Some Remarks on Kafka’s funniness*. If space allowed, one could juxtapose the Italian and the American — how do they each interpret the Czech?

[3] Many scholars and commentators have noted that in the book of Devarim, Moshe — speaking to the next generation (which still included some from the Exodus generation) — places the Sin of the Spies before the sin of the Golden Calf, and not by coincidence. This verse in Devarim aligns closely with the verse in our portion: “Efes, for the people are strong.”

[4] One might suggest that the shift lies in the addition of the word “heavens” [shamayim], though that would lead us into an entirely different cultural realm — a comparison more interreligious than literary. Since we have now completed the analytical-Torah portion of this dvar Torah and have entered the gates of homiletics, I’ll add another comment from the Ramban. He resolves Moshe’s ‘dangerous ‘reuse of the spies ‘very words by framing it as an educational message. Why did Moshe take the risk of sounding like the spies? Because of the need to warn the people — now poised to enter and conquer the land — against the grave spiritual danger of thinking, “My own strength and the might of my hand have made me this wealth.” From here, the classic vorts are well known.

But since we’ve already opened a footnote, it’s worth noting that this is far from the only instance in which the spies’ argument returns in the Bible — not as a sin, but as a superlative. We encounter it again throughout Scripture: in the book of Yehoshua, in Melachim I, and most strikingly in the opening of Nechemiah. There, in the great confession speech and the covenant renewal during the Second Temple period, Ezra indicts the people of the First Temple era (whose sins led to Israel’s exile and whose descendants, the returnees from Babylon, are now struggling to reestablish life in the land with meager resources). He accuses them of eating, satisfying their bellies, and growing fat — thanks to the fortified cities they conquered and the houses full of good things they inherited in the land of Canaan.

Notably, there is no mention at all of the Sin of the Spies (!), nor the “fortified cities” of the spies’ report — but fortified cities as a symbol of storage, abundance, and material prosperity. The fertile land fills man’s heart with pride. This recalls the Ramban’s comment: we are dealing here with a matter entirely distinct from the Sin of the Spies. In fact, the phrase has already been severed from that sin. Which brings us back to the question: why, then, were the spies punished so harshly?

[5] It’s worth noting that he began his journey into the notion of ‘lightness’ in literature with Ovid, passed through Lucretius and Cavalcanti, moved on to Cyrano de Bergerac and Medusa, and ended with Kafka — quite the journey, all in an effort to avoid the book of Bamidbar!

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### Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

#### Rabbi Ahron Lopiansky The Very, Very Good Land

It is no small coincidence that as we lein Parshas Shlach this week, Eretz Yisroel is enmeshed in such a difficult struggle. Between the terrible trepidation, and the incredible hope for an extraordinary victory, we need to better understand one of the central features of Eretz Yisroel.

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Let us paraphrase a question posed in *Sefer Akeidas Yitzchak*: if Eretz Yisroel is such a wonderful country, and Yisroel should have grabbed it, then they are simply being stupid for rejecting it, rather than sinful. Even if they were scared of battle, and perhaps illogically doubted that Hashem could help them vanquish the K’na’anim, why is it considered that they “rejected Eretz Yisroel”?

Let us turn to an incredible point about Eretz Yisroel that the Netziv makes. He asks: when Kalev and Yehoshua described Eretz Yisroel as being a wonderful place they used the phrase “for the land is very, very good”. Great people, and certainly the Torah, do not use empty flowery language! What is this repetition of “very” all about?

The Netziv answers that any gift which is continuously bestowed upon a person is lacking in two aspects: first, it tends to plateau, with the original excitement waning; and worse still, people become smug and cocky and suffer a sense of entitlement.

Eretz Yisroel, however, is very different. The immanence of Hashem’s hashgacha means that there is a very high standard to uphold and corresponding consequences. This means that no sense of “entitlement” takes hold, and that the occasionally very difficult periods constantly highlight the good that happens. This is what’s meant by “very, very good” - an extraordinary good, yet one devoid of the deficiencies typically associated with unusual abundance.

The Akeidas Yitzchak makes a similar point. He says that Israel did not reject the land because it was deficient per se; rather because it meant that our lives would be determined by a higher spiritual standard of behavior instead of the ebb and flow of nature. They were in effect rejecting a way of life of “walking with Hashem”.

It is hard not to think of these incredible words at this time. If there is anything we crave, it is a non-eventful existence. From the day that we have repopulated Eretz Yisroel we have yearned for just a quiet tranquil uneventful existence. For many the code word for living in Eretz Yisroel was ‘normalcy’. A normal natural uneventful life, after all that we have suffered. This has eluded us greatly. Both the incredible miracles and devastating tzoros are anything but ‘normal’ or ‘natural’.

This is not in spite of Eretz Yisroel being the promised land but rather because of it. Sinking into the lethargy of natural existence and overflowing abundance would rob us of our essence: being a nation bound to Hashem and whose very fortune echoes that bond.

May the impact of the terrible travails that we've gone through during the past two years become the guardrail which will allow for pure tov to be bestowed upon us in the future without having any of the challenges associated with pure tov.

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### **Mizrachi Dvar Torah**

**Rav Doron Perez**

In this week's parasha, we read of the sin of the spies, and the generation is then told they will not enter the land. But there were those – the “ma'apilim” – who tried to enter the Land against G-d's will. In a Midrash that relates to these episodes, it says how they were warned they would be attacked “like bees.” Rashi explains: bees may cause you pain, but they die after they sting. So too with our enemies. Yes, they can cause pain – sometimes devastating pain – but in the end, they inflict the greatest harm on themselves.

May Hashem protect our soldiers, heal our wounded, return our hostages, and have mercy on the innocent people under tyrannical regimes.

May life triumph over death, and love over hate.

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### **Torah.Org Dvar Torah**

**by Rabbi Label Lam**

#### **The Land of Our Dreams**

And HASHEM spoke to Moshe and Aaron, saying, “How much longer will this evil congregation ...” (Bamidbar 14:26-27)

Here's a curious and somewhat embarrassing fact. Everybody knows what a MINYAN is. It has even found its way into the Miriam Webster Dictionary. It's a quorum, a group of 10 men that is required to begin a Jewish prayer service, to say Kaddish, Kedusha, and read from a Sefer Torah. It's a magic number! Where is it learned from? From these words describing the 10 spies that deviated from their mission, “this evil congregation”. That's pretty awkward! Couldn't the Torah have found a more positive source to teach us an EIDA is a group of 10?!

Reb Tzadok HaKohen writes that when a person does Teshuva, then whatever experience he has had in life can be utilized to serve HASHEM. Please excuse me if I dip into my deep past and draw on a memory from a less than holy source, but it has helped me enormously and I am still learning from it many years later.

It was 1974, Thanksgiving, and my brother bought a couple of tickets for himself, me, and another friend to attend a concert at Madison Square Garden to watch Elton John play. It was exciting and beyond for us American kids. We were really enjoying it when something

totally unusual and unexpected happened. The star of the night, Mr. John, announced in the middle of the event that he was inviting on stage a good friend and he proceeded to welcome John Lennon. Now John Lennon was a Beatle and the Beatles had an almost deity-like status among young people all over the world for decades.

The place went wild. My brother was hitting me in my ribs with his elbow and shouting, “It's a Beatle Bobby, it's a Beatle!” They played an old song, “She was Just Seventeen...”. Madison Square Garden was pulsing “like one man with one heart” as John Lennon with ease plucked the guitar strings. It was one of the most magical and unifying events I had ever witnessed.

Years later I found my way to Yeshivas Ohr Somayach in Monsey and I remember one Rebbe explaining why we lift our heels when reciting in Kiddusha, “KADOSH-KADOSH-KADOSH” – He told us that at the time that we are reciting Kedusha and raising up our heels, the entire angelic world is jumping and dancing with ecstasy in response.

My mind immediately flashed back to that experience from years earlier. When I have the presence of mind to remember, it has helped me to focus and visualize the grand import of what I am doing. Yes, I am like that lone Beatle on the center stage of the universe gently touching those strings and generating an indescribable pulse of sublime unity. This is lesson number one.

Years later I felt comfortable sharing this experience. Someone told me that I could easily revisit the concert online. I became curious and it was as I had remembered. The camera is scanning the crowd and there is John Lennon's wife with her lips pursed nervously and rubbing her hands like the mother of the Bar Mitzvah boy in the women's section. It seemed odd to me that she was not enjoying it like everyone else. So, I scrolled to read an article. I learned there that he had not played music in public for many years prior to this appearance and it was his last public performance. He was afraid of his own shadow, afraid of failing. It hit me with such force. Someone who with a few movements could electrify a room of 20,000 people, plus was scared to try. I realized that we may not realize the importance of the moves we make and how powerful we are.

The Chiddushei HaRim often employs this method of thinking, “Mida Tova Meruba” – The goodness that HASHEM delivers is, at least 500 times more than any seeming negativity. If 10 complainers can frustrate the dreams of a generation and forestall their entry into the Holy Land, then how much more so,

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in the positive direction, can 10 men who gather to sanctify HASHEM's name, bring us much closer to the land of our dreams.



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### The Sin of the Meraglim

Adopted and translated by CS from **Nechama Leibowitz Iyunim B'Sefer Bamidbar**

#### *The Mission Was Permitted But Not Ideal*

The parsha of the meraglim begins: שלח לך אנשים Send for yourself men (Bamidbar 13:2). Rashi, based on Chazal, explains: שלח לך לך Send for yourself, according to your understanding. I am not commanding you. If you wish, send. This already shows that sending the meraglim was not the highest level. Klal Yisrael had lived with open hashgachah in the midbar. They were surrounded by the Ananei Hakavod, fed by the manna, and guided by Hashem. Ideally, they should have entered Eretz Yisrael with complete trust in Hashem's promise, without first testing whether the promise seemed realistic.

But Nechama Leibowitz emphasizes an important nuance. The request to send meraglim was not automatically wicked. A person is not always expected to live on the highest possible level of bitachon.

There is room for hishtadlus, for normal human effort and preparation. Chazal say: בדרך שאדם רוצה לילך בה מוליכין אותו In the way a person wants to go, he is led. If Klal Yisrael wanted to enter the land through the natural path of scouts and investigation, Hashem allowed that path. It was not commanded, but it was permitted. The problem was not the act of sending messengers. The problem was what the messengers did with their mission.

#### *A Mission to Report Not to Decide*

Moshe gave the meraglim specific questions. He did not ask them whether Klal Yisrael should enter Eretz Yisrael. He did not ask them whether Hashem's promise could be fulfilled. He asked them to gather information.

The Torah says: וראיתם את הארץ מה היא ואת העם הישב עליה החזק הוא אם רב ומה הארץ אשר הוא ישב בה הטובה היא אם רעה (Bamidbar 13:18). Moshe continued: ומה הארץ אשר הוא ישב בה הטובה היא אם רעה And what is the land in which they dwell, is it good or bad, and what are the cities in which they dwell, are they open camps or fortified cities (13:19). He then added: ומה הארץ השמנה היא אם רזה היש בה עץ אם אין (13:20). And what is the land, is it fat or lean, is there a tree in it or not (13:20).

Nechama carefully organizes these questions. Moshe asked about the people: החזק הוא הרפה Are they strong or weak, and הרע הוא אם רב Are they few or many. He asked about the land as a place to live: הטובה היא אם רעה Is it good or bad. He asked about the cities from the standpoint of conquest: הבמחנים אם במבצרים Are they open camps or fortified cities. He asked about the agricultural quality of the land: השמנה היא אם רזה Is it fat or lean, and היש בה עץ אם אין Is there a tree or not.

This structure matters because the first report of the meraglim seems to answer Moshe's questions. They say: באנו אל הארץ אשר שלחתנו וגם זבת חלב ודבש היא וזה פריה We came to the land to which you sent us, and it indeed flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit (13:27). They begin with praise. The land is good. It is זבת חלב ודבש, flowing with milk and honey. They even bring fruit as proof.

Until this point, they seem to be doing what they were sent to do.

#### *The Dangerous Word אפס*

Then their tone changes: אפס כי עז העם הישב בארץ והערים בצרות גדולתן However, the people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are very greatly fortified, and we also saw the children of the giant there (13:28).

The key word is אפס, however. It does not merely introduce another fact. It changes the meaning of the facts that came before. It is as if they are saying: yes, the land is good, yes, it flows with milk and honey, yes, the fruit is impressive, but none of that matters because the people are too strong and the cities are too fortified.

Here the sin begins to appear. The meraglim have not yet said openly, "Do not go." But their words are no longer neutral. They are beginning to frame the facts in a way that weakens the people.

This is the Ramban's sharp question. What did the meraglim do wrong? Moshe himself had asked whether the people were strong or weak. They answered that the people were strong. Moshe had asked whether the cities were open or fortified. They answered that the cities were fortified. If so, why were they blamed?

The Ramban (13:2) asks: מה עשו המרגלים כי משה אמר להם וראיתם את הארץ מה היא ואת העם הישב עליה החזק הוא הרפה What did the meraglim

do wrong, since Moshe said to them: see what the land is, and the people who dwell in it, whether they are strong or weak?

The answer is that they were not punished for reporting facts. They were punished for using those facts to create despair. Moshe asked for information that would help the nation prepare to enter the land. They gave information in a way that made the people afraid to enter.

#### *Witnesses Who Became Advisors*

The Akeidas Yitzchak (Rav Yitzchak Arama 1420–1494), explains this with a mashal. A person sends a messenger to inspect merchandise. The messenger is asked to report whether the merchandise is good or bad, strong or weak, expensive or cheap. If the messenger returns and says, “It is good, but the price is too high, and therefore you should not buy it,” he has gone beyond his role. He was sent to report, not to decide.

So too, the meraglim were sent to describe Eretz Yisrael. They were not appointed to decide whether Hashem’s promise should be trusted. Their job was testimony, not policy. They were witnesses, not advisors.

This explains why Calev reacts immediately: ויהם כלב את העם אל משה ויאמר עלה נעלה וירשנו אתה כי יכול נוכל לה toward Moshe and said: we shall surely go up and inherit it, for we can surely do it (13:30).

Calev does not deny the facts. He does not say the people are weak. He does not say the cities are open. He hears the conclusion hidden inside the word אפס. He understands that the meraglim are using danger to weaken emunah. Therefore, he answers not with a new report, but with confidence: עלה נעלה We shall surely go up.

#### *From לא נוכל to לא אפס*

Only after Calev speaks do the meraglim say openly what had been hidden before: לא נוכל לעלות אל העם כי חזק הוא ממנו against the people, for they are stronger than us (13:31).

This is the second stage. Now they are no longer merely reporting. They are issuing a decision: לא נוכל We cannot. But this was never their assignment. They were asked what the land was like. They were not asked whether Hashem could bring them into it.

Chazal read the words ממנו הוא חזק כי in a deeper way. The simple meaning is, they are stronger than we are. But Chazal explain: חזק הוא הזק הוא הטיהו דברים כלפי מעלה – ממנו As if they were saying, chas v’shalom, that the nations were stronger than Hashem. (Bamidbar Raba 16;11) The Midrash is uncovering the implicit meaning of their words. Once they said לא נוכל, we cannot, they were no longer speaking only about military strength. If Hashem had promised the land, then saying “we cannot” meant that they were measuring the nations against Hashem’s promise and deciding that the nations were stronger.

The meraglim judged the situation only by the natural order.

Naturally, they may have been right. A nation of former slaves in the midbar could not easily conquer fortified cities and powerful nations. But Klal Yisrael was not entering Eretz Yisrael as an ordinary nation relying only on ordinary strength. They were entering with Hashem’s promise. Their mistake was that they treated the natural obstacle as the final word.

#### *When Truth Becomes דיבה*

The third stage is the worst: ויוציאו דבת הארץ אשר תרו אתה אל בני ישראל They brought out an evil report about the land that they had spied out to Bnei Yisrael (13:32).

The audience has now changed. At first, they reported to Moshe and Aharon. Now they speak אל בני ישראל, to the people. Their words become a public campaign of fear.

They say: הארץ אשר עברנו בה לתור אתה ארץ אכלת יושביה היא The land through which we passed to spy it out is a land that consumes its inhabitants (13:32). This is very different from Moshe’s question. Moshe asked: הטובה היא אם רעה Is it good or bad. At first, they answered: זבת חלב ודבש היא It flows with milk and honey. Now the same land becomes ארץ אכלת יושביה, a land that consumes its inhabitants.

Here Nechama adds another important nuance. דיבה does not always mean that every word is a complete lie. The Akeidas Yitzchak explains that even ארץ אכלת יושביה may have been based on something they saw. They may have meant that the land was harsh and intense, so only very powerful people survived there. In that sense, the land “consumed” weaker inhabitants and left only the strong.

But that itself is the danger. A partial truth, when used to frighten and discourage, becomes דיבה. The meraglim may have seen real things, but they interpreted them in the darkest way and used them to weaken the people’s trust in Hashem.

This also explains Chazal’s rule: כל לשון הרע שאין בו דבר אמת בתחלתו Any lashon hara that does not contain some truth at the beginning will not last in the end. The power of the meraglim’s words came from the fact that they began with truth. The land really had impressive fruit. The people really were strong. The cities really were fortified. But because the report contained truth, the false conclusion became more convincing.

They continue: ונהי בעינינו כחגבים וכן היינו בעיניהם We were in our own eyes like grasshoppers, and so we were in their eyes (13:33). The first collapse was internal. ונהי בעינינו We were in our own eyes. Before the inhabitants saw them as small, they saw themselves as small. Fear changed how they saw the world because it first changed how they saw themselves.

#### *The Answer of Yehoshua and Calev*

Yehoshua and Calev answer with a completely different way of seeing: טובה הארץ מאד מאד The land is very, very good (14:7). They do not deny the danger. They do not deny that the people are strong or that the cities are fortified. But they refuse to let those facts define reality.

They say: אפץ בנו ה' והביא אתנו אל הארץ הזאת ונתנה לנו ארץ אשר היא זבת חלב ודבש If Hashem desires us, He will bring us to this land and give it to us, a land that flows with milk and honey (14:8). The real question is not whether there are dangers. The real question is whether Hashem is with them.

They continue: אך בה' אל תמרדו ואתם אל תיראו את עם הארץ But do not rebel against Hashem, and do not fear the people of the land (14:9). This is a crucial phrase. Fear becomes rebellion when it denies Hashem’s promise. A person may see danger and still have emunah. A person may plan, prepare, and take precautions. But when danger becomes a reason to reject Hashem’s word, fear has become מרידה.

Then Yehoshua and Calev say: כי לחמנו הם סר צלם מעליהם וה' אתנו אל For they are our bread; their protection has departed from them, and Hashem is with us, do not fear them (14:9).

This is the perfect answer to the meraglim. The meraglim said: ארץ היא אכלת יושביה The land consumes its inhabitants. Yehoshua and Calev answered: כי לחמנו הם They are our bread. The meraglim

described the land as something that eats people. Yehoshua and Calev described the nations as something that would be eaten, meaning they would be overcome easily with Hashem's help. Same land. Same facts. Opposite emunah.

#### *The Crying for Generations*

The people accepted the fear of the meraglim. The Torah says: ותשא כל העדה ויתנו את קולם ויבכו העם בלילה ההוא and they raised their voices and cried, and the people cried that night (14:1). Chazal say that Hashem told them: אתם בכיתם בכיה של חנם ואני קובע לכם בכיה: You cried a crying for nothing, and I will establish for you crying for generations.

Their crying was not ordinary sadness. It was a rejection of Hashem's goodness. They cried as if the land Hashem promised was a tragedy rather than a gift. They turned Eretz Yisrael from זבת חלב ודבש into ארץ אכלת יושביה, from a land flowing with blessing into a land of danger and fear.

#### **The Lesson**

The sin of the meraglim did not begin with an obvious denial of Hashem. It began with reasonable-sounding facts. It began with practical concerns. It began with reports that seemed to answer Moshe's questions.

But then came אפס, however. Then came לא נוכל, we cannot. Then came ארץ אכלת יושביה, a land that consumes its inhabitants. Step by step, facts became fear, fear became despair, and despair became rebellion.

The lesson is not that a person should ignore reality. Moshe himself asked about the people, the cities, the land, and the produce. Torah does not demand blindness. But Torah demands that facts be seen inside the larger truth of Hashem's promise.

Hishtadlus asks: what must we do to fulfill Hashem's will? Fear asks: can Hashem really fulfill His word? The meraglim crossed that line. They used human investigation not to prepare for the promise, but to undermine it.

Calev's words remain the answer to the whole episode: עלה נעלה וירשנו אתה כי יכול נוכל לה We shall surely go up and inherit it, for we can surely do it. He was not saying there were no dangers. He was saying that danger is not the final word. Hashem's promise is the final word.

The meraglim were sent to see Eretz Yisrael. They saw its fruit, its cities, its people, and its giants. But they did not see it as the land promised by Hashem. Yehoshua and Calev saw the same land and reached the opposite conclusion: טובה הארץ מאד מאד The land is very, very good. The difference was not in the facts they saw, but in how they saw them. The meraglim saw through fear and despair. Yehoshua and Calev saw through emunah.

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#### **Shlach – The Danger of a Crooked Beginning**

Adapted by cs from *Aleinu LiShabeach* by Rav Yitzchok Zilberstein

##### *The Danger of Giving Oneself Room to Be Mistaken*

The Torah begins the parsha with Hashem's words to Moshe Rabbeinu, שלח לך אנשים, send for yourself men. Rashi explains that Hashem was not commanding Moshe to send the meraglim. Rather, He was allowing it. Rashi adds the sharp words of Chazal: אני אמרתי להם שהיא טובה הייהם שאני נותן להם מקום לטעות *I told them that the land is good; by their lives, I will give them room to make a mistake.*

This teaches a frightening rule in avodas Hashem. When a person goes against the will of Hashem, ניתנת הרשות ללשונו להטעותו ולסמא, permission is given to his own tongue to mislead him and blind his eyes. The danger is not only that he does something wrong. The deeper danger is that after he begins in the wrong place, his own arguments begin to sound convincing. What should have been clear becomes doubtful. What should have been impossible to justify begins to sound reasonable.

This was the beginning of the chet hameraglim. Hashem had already told them that Eretz Yisrael was טובה, good. There was no real doubt to resolve. But once they insisted on examining the land on their own terms, they were given מקום לטעות, room to err. They entered a trap in which their own words and reasoning would make the mistake look correct.

##### *The Thief Who Davens While Stealing*

The Gemara describes גנבא אפום מחרתתא רחמנא קריא, a thief at the mouth of the tunnel calls out to Hashem. The thief is about to commit a crime, yet he davens to Hashem for success. He may not even be pretending. He may truly ask Hashem to help him enter safely, steal successfully, and return home in peace.

But that itself shows how far a person can fall. He does not notice the contradiction. He is asking Hashem to help him commit an aveirah. His religious language does not prove that his heart is straight. It may be part of the confusion. Once a person stands inside an aveirah, even his tefillah can become twisted.

So too with the meraglim. Their words sounded practical and serious. They spoke about roads, cities, strong nations, giants, danger, and military reality. Later, the argument even took on the language of pikuach nefesh. But the whole discussion began from the wrong place. Hashem had promised the land. Once they stepped away from that emunah, their own reasoning began to hide the truth from them.

##### *How Could the Nation Want to Stone Yehoshua and Calev*

The pasuk says, ותאמר כל העדה לרגום אותם באבנים, the whole assembly said to stone Yehoshua and Calev. This is shocking. How could the nation fall so far that they were ready to kill the very tzaddikim who were speaking the truth?

This was not a simple mob of empty people. These were Bnei Yisrael in the midbar. Among them were great people, leaders, and heads of the nation. How could they look at Yehoshua and Calev, who were urging them to trust Hashem, and see them as criminals worthy of death?

The answer is that once the mistake was accepted, each new step made the next mistake easier. First, the meraglim gave their report. Then the people cried, ותשא כל העדה ויתנו את קולם ויבכו העם בלילה ההוא, the whole assembly raised their voice and cried that night. That public reaction itself became proof in the minds of the meraglim and the people. They could say, look, the entire nation understands that we are right. Everyone sees the danger. Everyone feels the fear. But a mistaken public reaction does not turn sheker into emes. The fact that many people are frightened does not prove that the fear is correct. The fact that a whole ציבור accepts an argument does not make it true. When the starting point is wrong, even the response of the crowd can become another layer of self-deception.

##### *A Psak Built on a Crooked Beginning*

The meraglim and the leaders did not necessarily present themselves as rebels. They could frame the matter as a serious question of pikuach nefesh. If entering Eretz Yisrael would endanger the men,

women, and children of Klal Yisrael, then perhaps it was forbidden to go forward. In their distorted reasoning, they could even say that the situation required them to appoint a new leader and return to Mitzrayim.

This is a frightening part of the chet. The rebellion was not only emotional. It was given the form of a decision. They treated fear as if it were halachic clarity. They looked at the strong nations and fortified cities, concluded that the people were in danger, and then used that conclusion to reject the direction of Moshe Rabbeinu. But that was exactly the mistake. If they truly believed there was a real question of pikuach nefesh, they should have brought it to Moshe Rabbeinu. They should have submitted the question to the authority of Torah. Instead, they became their own judges. They began from fear and negiah, and then built a whole structure of reasoning on top of it.

This is what happens when a person sins and is then led into further mistakes. כאשר האדם חוטא מכשילין אותו בטעויות נוספות, when a person sins, he is caused to stumble in additional mistakes. One wrong step does not remain alone. It creates a new way of seeing. It changes how a person understands facts, how he hears advice, how he judges risk, and how he views those who disagree with him.

#### *When the Truth Looks Dangerous*

Once the people accepted the argument that entering Eretz Yisrael was dangerous, Yehoshua and Calev began to look dangerous. In truth, they were the ones speaking with emunah. They said, עלה נעלה, וירשנו אותה, we can surely go up and inherit it. They insisted that Hashem would help them. But in the eyes of a nation already trapped in fear, Yehoshua and Calev looked like men who were endangering everyone.

This explains how the people could reach the point of wanting to stone them. They were not thinking, let us kill tzaddikim. They were thinking, these men are pushing the nation into danger. If the people listen to Yehoshua and Calev, then the men will fall by the sword and the women and children will be taken captive. Once that was their way of looking at the situation, violence against Yehoshua and Calev could seem justified.

This is the most frightening part of the process. A person can be so blinded by a wrong beginning that emes looks like danger and danger looks like responsibility. The ones who are trying to save him look like enemies, and the ones pulling him away from Hashem's word look like protectors.

#### *The Hidden Negiah of the Meraglim*

Behind all of this stood the personal negiah of the meraglim. The Zohar explains that the meraglim feared that when Bnei Yisrael entered Eretz Yisrael, they would lose their positions as leaders. In the midbar they were נשיאים, leaders of the tribes. In Eretz Yisrael, a new order might begin, and they might no longer hold the same honor.

This personal interest did not necessarily appear openly in their words. They did not say, we are afraid of losing our positions. They spoke about the strength of the nations, the size of the giants, and the danger to the people. Their argument sounded national, practical, and responsible. But underneath it was a private fear.

That is the power of negiah. A person does not always know how much his personal interest is shaping his thinking. He may speak sincerely. He may even believe that he is acting for the public good. But if his own honor, comfort, position, or fear is mixed into the

issue, his judgment can become crooked. He sees real facts, but interprets them through a distorted lens.

#### *The Positive Side: Middah Tovah Merubah*

The lesson does not end with the danger. There is also a positive side. Just as sin can lead a person into further mistakes, מידה טובה, מרובה, the measure of good is greater. When a person begins with a mitzvah and acts with a לב טהור, a pure heart, Shamayim helps him. His path is made successful.

A powerful example is the holy program of אבות ובנים, fathers and sons learning Torah together. Wherever the program was established, the ציבור accepted the idea fully. In a short time, crowds of children came with their fathers to the beis medrash and began to learn. The success was remarkable.

Yet the idea itself was not new. Fathers and sons learning together had always existed. So what gave this effort such special power? Such success can be an אות ברור, a clear sign, that the project began בלב טהור ללא פניות אישיות וללא רצון לזכות בכבוד, without personal motives, and without a desire for honor. דבר שנעשה, something done with a pure heart is bound to produce such positive results.

This is the opposite of the meraglim. They began with negiah, so their wisdom led them downward. Avos Ubanim began with purity, so a simple idea became a source of tremendous berachah.

#### *Preparing the Ground for Siyata D'Shmaya*

The final lesson is practical for every person. If we want to succeed, the first step is not cleverness, strategy, or public approval. The first step is to remove our own negios. Before giving advice, making a decision, criticizing someone else, or deciding what is right, a person has to ask himself honestly: what do I want here? Am I searching for the truth, or am I protecting myself? Am I acting for Hashem, or am I defending my honor, comfort, or position?

When a person removes personal interest, he prepares the ground for שפע של סייעתא דשמיא, an abundance of siyata d'Shmaya. A lev tahor allows the mind to see clearly. But when the heart is mixed with negiah, even a sharp mind can become a tool for the wrong side. The chet hameraglim shows how far hidden personal motives can go. They can turn fear into policy, policy into a false psak, and a false psak into hatred of the very people who speak the truth. But the success of Avos Ubanim shows the opposite. When something is done with a pure heart, without personal honor and without hidden agenda, it can draw a special berachah from Shamayim.

This was always true. But when one sees the fruits of a project built with purity, אי אפשר שלא לחוש בכך, it is impossible not to feel it. The avodah is לבב טהור ולא פניות אישיות, a pure heart and no personal motives.

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## **RAV SCHACHTER ON THE PARSHA I**

Insights and Commentary Based on the Shiurim of Rav Hershel Schachter

Adapted by Dr. Allan Weissman

<https://tinyurl.com/RavSchachterontheParsha> and at [torahweb.org](http://torahweb.org)

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### **Parshas Shelach**

#### **Archaeological Evidance**

In 1887, Rav Gershon Henoch Leiner, the Radziner Rebbe, wrote the sefer Sefunei Temunei Chol about his attempt at identifying the techeiles. He was interested in preparing for the rebuilding of the

Beis HaMikdash and reinstating the offering of korbanos, and in order to accomplish this, the Kohanim would have to wear the bigdei kehunah, a number of which require techeiles. Regarding the mitzvah of tzitzis, there is a machlokes among the Tanna'im whether the techeiles strings are indispensable to the fulfillment of the mitzvah. The Ba'al HaMa'or held like the minority opinion that the techeiles strings are indispensable. In fact, the Ramban reports that the Ba'al HaMa'or did not wear tzitzis at all, following his view that there is no mitzvah to wear a tallis with only white strings. The accepted opinion, however, is that wearing a tallis without techeiles is a partial fulfillment of the mitzvah, although the complete mitzvah requires both the white and the techeiles strings. However, regarding bigdei kehunah, all agree that without techeiles, the garments are unfit for use in the avodah. The Radziner Rebbe felt that we should do our utmost to prepare for the functioning of the Third Beis HaMikdash, and, to that end, he embarked on a mission to re-discover the identity of the chilazon, which is used to dye the woolen techeiles strings. He opined that the cuttlefish was the chilazon and he encouraged his Chassidim to use this dye in the preparation of the strings of the tallis.

The Beis HaLevi disagreed with the Radziner Rebbe, but the exact nature of his disagreement is a matter of debate. In the collection of correspondence between the Rebbe and other gedolim regarding the techeiles, an anonymous letter written by a close acquaintance of the Beis HaLevi explains the latter's position. He writes that if the Rebbe would have proven that the chilazon was a sea creature that the earlier generations were unaware of, the Beis HaLevi would have been prepared to agree with his conclusion. However, the dye of the cuttlefish had been recognized for centuries, and since the earlier generations did not make use of this sea creature in the preparation of techeiles, that is tantamount to a masorah that the Rebbe's findings were incorrect and that the cuttlefish is not the chilazon. The Soloveitchik family, however, has a different tradition as to what the Beis HaLevi's objection was. We heard from Rav Soloveitchik, as the Soloveitchik cousins heard from the Brisker Rav, that even if the cuttlefish was, in fact, the true chilazon, it still would remain unusable. In order to identify the chilazon, an unbroken chain of masorah is necessary, and the masorah cannot be reconstructed based on archaeological evidence. Rav Elyashiv believed that the objection of the Beis HaLevi must have been as described in the first version. That is, if a species of sea creature that was not available since the time of the Ge'onim, when the tradition concerning the identity of the chilazon was lost, were now to be rediscovered, it would be acceptable. Scientific, historical, or archaeological proof can, in fact, be relied upon to reconstruct a forgotten masorah.

The Gemara in Bava Basra relates that an Arab merchant showed Rabbah bar bar Chanah those who had perished during the forty years of wandering in the midbar in the time of Moshe. After he returned, his colleagues said to him that he ought to have counted the threads and counted the wound sections of their tzitzis to report whether they had a total of six or eight strings at each corner, so as to know whether the halachah is in accordance with Beis Shammai or Beis Hillel who disputed this point. It seems clear from this Gemara that observation of the archaeological evidence would have been admissible. Similarly, the Gemara in Sukkah relates that Rabbi Eliezer saw the actual tzitz of the Kohen Gadol in Rome and testified that the words קודש ליה were inscribed on only one line. The Rambam

rules that the inscription should preferably be written on two separate lines, ליה on the upper line and קודש on the lower line. The Rambam adds, however, that bedi'eved, if the inscription was written on one line, it is acceptable. The Kesef Mishnah explains that the Rambam knew this from the testimony of Rabbi Eliezer, which is considered valid factual verification. A third discussion of archaeological evidence involves the well-known dispute between Rashi and Rabbeinu Tam as to the proper order of parshiyos in the tefillin. The Bach writes of a report from Eretz Yisrael that Rashi tefillin were found at the gravesite of Yechezkel HaNavi, implying that these are the tefillin with the correct order of parshiyos. The Derishah counters that it may be that these tefillin were archived in genizah specifically because they were unfit for use due to their incorrect order of parshiyos. Both sides of the argument seem to hold that in principle, archaeological evidence, if properly analyzed, is indeed acceptable. This understanding paves the way for reliance on the recent evidence identifying the chilazon as the Murex Trunculus snail to restore the masorah of authentic techeiles. Even if the evidence proves to be incorrect, the Gemara in Menachos states clearly that if an imitation techeiles, such as kla ilan, is used in error, the indigo thread should be considered like white thread. The mitzvah of tzitzis will still be fulfilled with these white strings, albeit in an incomplete fashion. While there is a custom to use white strings as tzitzis, as this Gemara states, the use of blue-colored strings instead of white ones would not affect the fulfillment of the mitzvah. Therefore, since there exists at least a safek that we are now using authentic techeiles, we should apply the principle of ספק דאורייתא לחומרא, a doubt in relation to a d'oraisa obligation is decided stringently, and be required to make use of the current techeiles. This principle applies despite the fact that even after one purchases the current techeiles strings and uses them in his tallis, he still will not know if he did, in fact, succeed in accomplishing the mitzvah. The argument that one should not engage in activities that seem like arrogance should have no relevance in this case, since that consideration is limited to the fulfillment of a middas chassidus, not when fulfilling a halachic requirement like techeiles in tzitzis.

In fact, it would seem that wearing a tallis without the techeiles strings would constitute a violation of the lo sa'aseh of bal tigma, not to detract from the mitzvos of the Torah. The Beis HaLevi elucidates the definition of this issur. If one has detracted from a mitzvah to such an extent that he has not fulfilled the mitzvah at all, that would not be labeled as bal tigma, but as a bitul hamitzvah, which means cancellation of the mitzvah. Bal tigma refers to a case in which a mitzvah is knowingly performed lechatchilah in a way in which it is fulfilled only bedi'eved, in an incomplete fashion. Since we hold the absence of techeiles strings does not affect the mitzvah of wearing the white strings, one fulfills the mitzvah with the white strings alone. Nevertheless, if techeiles strings are available but are not used, resulting in an incomplete fulfillment of the mitzvah, one violates bal tigma. Since the obligation of tzitzis only applies if and when one dons a four-cornered garment, and our opting to wear the tallis in order to obligate ourselves in the mitzvah is done only as a middas chassidus, it would be better for one not to wear this tallis at all!

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## Parshas Shlach - The Spies Were Smitten by the Greatest Blindness There Is

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly portion: #1385 – Techeiles Today-Why Not? Good Shabbos!

I would like to share two Medrashim from Parshas Shelach. The first is in Medrash Rabbah Parsha 16 Siman 3. The Medrash quotes the pasuk “Grass withers and blossom fades, but the word of our G-d shall stand forever.” (Yeshaya 40:8). Then the Medrash, as it often does, asks, to what may the matter be compared?

The Medrash cites a mashal (parable) of a king who had a friend. The king promised his friend: “Walk with me and I will then give you a big present.” The friend of the king began to accompany him, but the friend then died. The king said to the surviving son of this friend: “Even though your father died (and therefore, strictly speaking, I don't need to give you the present that I promised him), I am still going to give you the present. Come and take it, because I am a man of my word.”

The Medrash says: So too, with Hakadosh Baruch Hu. The king in the mashal is Hakadosh Baruch Hu and the friend is Avraham Avinu (as it is written “the seed of Avraham my friend” (ohavi))” (Yeshaya 41:8). Hakadosh Baruch Hu said to Avraham Avinu “Walk with Me” – as it is written “Lech Lecha (Go forth) from your land, from your birthplace, from the house of your father to the Land that I will show you” (Bereshis 12:1). He promised to give Avraham a present – Eretz Yisrael.

Hakadosh Baruch Hu told Moshe that even though Avraham Avinu (and the other Avos) to whom I promised Eretz Yisrael already died, I am not retracting My promise. I will keep My promise (and give Eretz Yisrael to their descendants). That is the message of the above cited Medrash.

The analogy of the Medrash is somewhat problematic. When the king told his friend, “I am going to give you a present,” he specifically promised to give the present to his friend. He didn't say anything about the children. However, Hashem promised Eretz Yisrael to the children of the Avos: “Lecha et-ne-na u'l'zarecha” – I will give it to you and to your children! Eretz Yisrael was promised to the descendants of Avraham Avinu, so there is no comparison to the mashal of the Medrash.

The Avnei Nezer (1838-1910) (the Socachover Rebbe) interprets this Medrash. He says that the meraglim (spies) represented a sea change in the attitude of Klal Yisrael. From the time of Yetzias Mitzrayim until now, there was one constant in Klal Yisrael: They asked no kashas. They had no questions on the Ribono shel Olam. They followed with blind faith. They trusted the Ribono shel Olam one hundred per cent.

This, in fact, was an emulation of the attribute of Avraham Avinu. When Avraham was told “Lech lecha m'artzecha, u'mi'moladetecha, u'mi'beis avicha,” he didn't ask where he should go, he didn't ask how long the trip was going to take and he didn't ask how he should travel. He went with full faith in the Ribono shel Olam.

This blind faith was put into practice for Avraham and all his descendants until Parshas Shelach. However, when the people were on the outskirts of Eretz Yisrael and sensed that the time of entry into the land was upon them, they adopted a different attitude. “That is not how you conquer a country!” They insisted that the proper way to conquer a country is to first spy out the land.

This marked a sea change. They determined that their journey forward would have to be “normal” – al pi derecho hateva. From this point on, there was a lack of full faith and trust in the Ribono shel Olam. Therefore, in that sense, they were no longer the spiritual descendants of Avraham Avinu. The hallmark of the descendants of Avraham Avinu is “Lechtech Acharei bamidbar b'oretz lo zeruah” (you followed after Me in the Wilderness in an unsown land) (Yirmiyahu 2:2). No questions asked. When the Ribono shel Olam says “Jump,” you say “How high?”

So even though now they were no longer spiritually included in the promise “I will give Eretz Yisrael to you and your descendants,” nevertheless the Ribono shel Olam said, “I will give you Eretz Yisrael anyway.” That is the point of the Medrash. Just like in the mashal where the king said “I will give it to the son despite the fact that the father is no longer here,” so too, despite the fact that through their current actions and attitudes, Bnei Yisrael could not still claim to be true spiritual heirs of Avraham Avinu, nevertheless, the Ribono shel Olam still gave them Eretz Yisrael.

\* \* \* \* \*

The other Medrash I would like to share is the Medrash found in Shelach 16 Siman 4. The Medrash refers to the pasuk “Like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so too is a lazy one to those who send him.” (Mishlei 10:26) This means that just like everyone hates the taste of vinegar, so too the meraglim, who spoke lashon hara about Eretz Yisrael are hated. The Medrash critiques the meraglim as being lazy in fulfillment of their mission to spy out Eretz Yisrael. Without this Medrash, we might have said plenty of negative things about the meraglim, but laziness is probably not one of them. They traveled throughout Eretz Yisrael from border to border over a forty-day period. Why does the Medrash call them lazy?

I saw an interpretation in the name of Rav Shraga Grossbard (who was niftar in 1993 in Eretz Yisrael). He said that there are two types of laziness. There is physical laziness and there is mental laziness. Physical laziness is when someone does not get out of bed and does not do what he is supposed to do. He procrastinates, etc. However, there is also mental laziness, where someone does not pause to think and contemplate what is really happening.

Rav Grossbard said that the Medrash here is referring to mental laziness. The meraglim were guilty of this resistance to thinking. When they entered Eretz Yisrael and noticed the abundance of burials taking place, they claimed, “It is a land that consumes its inhabitants.” They could have noticed that their identity as spies was not being discovered because everyone was busy with funerals. However, they came to the opposite conclusion, saying “It is a land that consumes its inhabitants.”

I live half a mile from Sol Levenson and Brothers (the Jewish funeral parlor in Baltimore). They have their share of funerals, but they don't have them around the clock every single day. There are days when no funerals take place.

Does it make any sense that the whole country is burying people every day without there being some kind of plague? How do they look at this? If they take the superficial route, it must be a land that kills its inhabitants. But if they analyze it a bit more and delve into the matter, maybe Hashem is doing them a favor. Maybe He is keeping the populace preoccupied so that they don't notice the meraglim spying out the land from border to border. However, to arrive at this second conclusion, a person needs to think a bit. The

Medrash is saying that they were lazy concerning such level of analysis by not probing what was really happening.

Why were they lazy? To answer this, we must cite the famous Zohar that the reason they didn't want to probe was because, in a certain way, they did not want to go into Eretz Yisrael. They knew they would lose their positions of honor if they went into Eretz Yisrael, and therefore they were blinded by that knowledge. They saw what they wanted to see, and they believed what they wanted to believe. That colored their perspective. That is why they were "lazy in thought process." They wanted to come back with a report that said, "This is not for us."

We know from life that people do this all the time. They know what they want to know and they see what they want to see. In this connection, I found another Medrash in Parshas Toldos. The Medrash speaks of a country that was drafting an army for the king. A prerequisite for this army was that recruits had to be tall and strong and swift.

There was a certain woman who had a son who was a midget. She used to call her child "my swift tall child." She asked the king's officers "Why did you not draft my son? After all he is tall and swift!" They said to her, "Maybe in your eyes he is tall and swift, but in our eyes, he is a dwarf amongst dwarves."

When a child is four feet five inches tall, how can a mother, who knows that the requirement for the army is being six feet-five-inches tall, ask, "Why aren't you drafting my son – he is tall and swift!?" How does this happen? This is an extreme example of a person seeing what he wants to see. That is what happened to the meraglim. It is in that sense that the Medrash calls them lazy. They were lazy in that they did not delve and they did not probe. They did not look at the situation and declare, "This does not make any sense. What does it mean?" They were blinded by the greatest blindness there is – the ability to only see what they want to see and not to see what is really there.

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Edited by Dovid Hoffman; Baltimore, MD [dhoffman@torah.org](mailto:dhoffman@torah.org) This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly Torah portion. A listing of the halachic portions for Parshas Sh'lach is provided below: 016 Mixed Seating at Weddings 061 – The Minyan: Who Counts? 105 – Tallis: Does it Cover Only Married Men? 150 – Tzitzis: Must They Be Worn? 197 – Carrying Medicine on Shabbos 243 – The Concept of Prison in Jewish Law 287 – Women and Tzitzis 333 – Techeiles Today 377 – Tzitzis: Must They Be Seen? 421 – The Issur of Histaklus 465 – Donning a Tallis for The Amud 509 – Ain Ma'averin Al Hamitzvos 553 – Women and Tzitzis Revisited 597 – Davening at the Graves of Tzadikim ... 1559 – A Silver Atara for Your Talis: Is It a Good Idea? 1601 – Visiting a Cemetery to Daven – Not As Simple As You May Think A complete catalogue can be ordered from the Yad Yechiel Institute, PO Box 511, Owings Mills MD 21117-0511. Call (410) 358-0416 or e-mail tapes@yadyechiel.org or visit <http://www.yadyechiel.org/> for further information. Rav Frand © 2023 by Torah.org.

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#### The Future of Jews in America

Looking around the country today, the America we Jews have come to know, appreciate, and love is becoming increasingly unrecognizable. While this may have been true the last several years on a cultural level with the move towards more progressive values and blurring of definitions, lines, and institutions in ways that are totally incompatible with our sacred tradition,

now it is true in a more personal and specific way, a way that makes us feel increasingly uncomfortable and unsafe.

In his Halachic responsa, Rav Moshe Feinstein, himself an immigrant from Europe in 1937 fleeing from increased anti-Jewish sentiment and Soviet religious persecution, described America as a malchus shel chesed, a kingdom of kindness for the Jewish people. Similarly, Rabbi Menashe Klein (the Ungvarer Rav) and Rav Moshe Stern (the Debreciner Rav), who moved to America after surviving the Holocaust, describe this country in their teshuvos as a medinah shel chesed, a benevolent nation.

What might they write today about the same country that features, as a major party candidate for U.S. Senate, a man who for years unabashedly sported a tattoo of the Nazi SS "Totenkopf?" At a rally this week for this candidate in Portland, when asked, "Would an Israeli flag tattoo be a deal breaker?" one attendee said, "Honestly yeah, because I don't support genocide." While that only represents one voter's view, this candidate continues to be endorsed by mainstream leaders of the Democratic Party despite the reporting about his vile Jew hate, among other disturbing problems.

Dan Bilzerian, who has 30 million Instagram followers, is on the ballot as a Republican in Florida's 6th Congressional District. While he has little chance of winning, as an extremist, vulgar antisemite, his mere presence on the ballot combined with whatever percentage of the votes he will get, is jarring.

Literally as I was sitting down to write this, members of the neo-Nazi group Blood Tribe marched through Athens, Georgia carrying a swastika banner, and a sitting member of Congress delivered a rant against Israel filled with long-debunked falsehoods. It truly seems not a day goes by in this country without one or more terrible stories involving antisemitic rhetoric or, worse, actual violence, and it is coming from all parties and all sides.

So what is the future for Jews in America? Is it the Malchus and Medinah shel chesed, a country of unprecedented religious freedom, a democracy that awards rights and protection to our people? Or is it, as other ancestors warned, a "treifene medinah," a place that Jews don't belong, a country that will compromise and corrupt us morally and physically?

As we approach the celebration of America's 250th anniversary, for Jews living here, this is an essential question. Certainly, American Jews—like those throughout the Diaspora—should be asking ourselves not if, but when we will move to Israel. That is the destiny and must be the destination for us all.

But in the meantime, is our time in America just a holding pattern, a passive, meaningless stopover? Rav Aharon Kotler certainly didn't think so. In a time when it was tremendously unpopular to move here, Rav Aharon saw his immigration to America in religious terms, as a mission connected with the fulfillment of a prophecy of Rav Chaim Volozhener. In a tradition relayed by not only Rav Aharon Kotler, but Rav Chaim Ozer, Rav Yaakov Ruderman, Rav Dovid Lifschitz, Rav Aharon Soloveitchik and others, in 1803, at the laying of the cornerstone of his yeshiva in Volozhin, Rav Chaim Volozhener tearfully told his talmidim, "This will not be the final station of Torah before Moshiach. Torah has yet to flourish in the American before he can come. America will be the final stop of galus."

Rav Aharon Kotler took this as a charge to build Torah in the New World. He planted the seeds for what would become the largest yeshiva in the world and a network of kollelim in communities around America.

Speaking about the purpose of being spread throughout the galus more generally, Rav Gedalya Schorr (Ohr Gedalyahu, Shemini Atzeres) writes that Hashem sends us to different countries and cities to collect the righteous converts and to redeem the sparks in each location. We aren't there passively or accidentally; we are there with a mission and a purpose. By that standard, have the Jewish people succeeded in impacting America? Have we brought Torah values and ideals to this country? The answer is a resounding yes. In midst of the September 2000 presidential campaign, amid the national conversation about the religious observance of Joe Lieberman a"h, Michael Novak, a non-Jewish writer and philosopher who often wrote on theology, wrote in the New York Times:

I am pulling for Bush and Cheney, not Gore and Lieberman, and I am not Jewish but Roman Catholic. Still, I love what Senator Lieberman, an Orthodox Jew, is doing to wake this nation up to its deepest identity, rooted in Jewishness.

John Adams wrote, "I will insist that the Hebrews have done more to civilize men than any other nation." He wrote as a Christian, but added that even if he were an atheist and believed in chance, "I should believe that chance had ordered the Jews to preserve and propagate to all mankind the doctrine of a supreme, intelligent, wise, almighty sovereign of the universe, which I believe to be the great essential principle of all morality, and consequently of all civilization."...

The best kept secret of American history is that the favorite language of that founding generation came from the Torah. The founders referred to their own experiment as the Second Israel. They commissioned a design for the Great Seal with a symbol recalling the first Israel, for they thought of themselves as crossing the deserts of Egypt en route to building a "city on the hill."

Ben Franklin proposed as a motto of the Republic "Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God." It fit the American circumstance. The signers of the Declaration, after all, were committing treason. They needed some sort of moral warrant. They also needed hope that they could avoid the hangman's noose; they faced the most powerful army and navy in the world. It helped that they believed that Providence would assist them and that Providence had created the world so that liberty would in the end prevail. For without liberty, how could the Creator, who desired the friendship of free women and men rather than the worship of slaves, fulfill his eternal purposes?

Most historians lazily say that the founders were Deists, because they did not use Christian names for God, like Trinity and Savior and Redeemer. They miss the crucial point. Three names for God in the Declaration — Creator, Judge and Providence, are unmistakably Jewish names for God. This language did not come from the Greeks or Romans...

If for whatever reason our time in America is not yet over, we must be here with a sense of purpose and mission. Certainly, it is to defend and advocate for our values, morals and principles.

But in this moment, I think it is something even more.

As America celebrates 250 years, particularly for those who subscribe to "America First," we must speak of how America first came to be. This country was born from an extraordinary faith, deeply informed by the language and ideas of the Jewish Bible. When our Founders wrote in the Declaration of Independence that all men are "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights," they were echoing the first chapter of Genesis, that every human being is created b'tzelem Elokim, in the image of God. When they appealed to "the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God," they were affirming that there is a moral law higher than any king, any parliament, or polling data. When they concluded, "with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence," they spoke in the language of our prophets, a people placing its destiny in the hands of Heaven.

America must stand true to the principles, values, and ideals that made her exceptional in the first place.

The right for even someone with a Nazi tattoo to run for office is an American value. For anyone to endorse or vote for him is a grossly un-American value. The right to protest Israel, or even speak of Israel and Jews in vile terms, is American. The failure to stand with Israel, the only democracy in the Middle East, the land from which America's own values drew, is un-American.

The right to platform purveyors of hate is American. To amplify their message, spread evil lies against Israel or the Jewish people on college campuses, outside of Synagogues and even in the halls of Congress, is un-American.

As we approach this significant milestone, it is a critical time for us to stand tall and proud and tell our fellow citizens that antisemitism and anti-Zionism are not about hatred of the Jew alone. These beliefs are not only un-American, they are rooted in hatred of America.

We must align with allies, religious leaders, elected leaders and influencers to return and restore this great country to its roots. If America is to remain a medinah shel chesed, we cannot outsource that work to others. Each of us must ask: What am I doing to make my home more Jewish, my community more courageous, my elected officials more accountable, my non-Jewish neighbors more informed, and my children more proud? We must live with gratitude for this country, loyalty to our people, longing for Eretz Yisrael, and a renewed sense of responsibility for the sacred mission of Torah in America. We must work to ensure it remains a medina and malchus of chesed and not a treifene medinah.

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from: TorahWeb <torahweb@torahweb.org>

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**Rabbi Benjamin Yudin**

### **Finding the Needle in the Haystack**

Every year, when we encounter Parshas Shlach, we are forced to confront one of the most painful questions in the Torah: How could they? How could Bnei Yisrael, after witnessing the ten makkos, after crossing the Yam Suf, after standing at Har Sinai and experiencing a revelation unprecedented in human history, reject Hashem's plan to bring them into Eretz Yisrael? Already at the burning bush, in Sefer Shemos, Hashem had made the plan unmistakably clear: He would take Bnei Yisrael out of Mitzrayim and bring them to "eretz tovah u'rechavah - a good and spacious land", a land flowing with milk and honey. Yetzias Mitzrayim was never meant to end at freedom from slavery alone. It was always meant to culminate in entry into Eretz Yisrael. And yet, when the moment finally arrived, Bnei Yisrael hesitated. In Parshas Devarim, as Moshe Rabbeinu reviews the events of the midbar during the final days of his life, he describes the request to send spies in striking language: "Vatikrevun eilai kulchem - all of you approached me". Rashi, commenting on the word "kulchem," explains that they came in a state of "irbuva," confusion and disorder. This was not a dignified request presented calmly by the elders. It was a scene of pressure, fear, and panic. Younger people pushed ahead of elders. The nation was overtaken by anxiety. That panic itself already revealed the problem. After everything Hashem had done for them, should they have been afraid? The tragedy of the meraglim was not merely that they misread military realities. It was that they failed to believe in Hashem's word. They looked at the fortified cities and the mighty inhabitants of the land and concluded that the task was beyond them. In effect, they allowed fear to overpower faith.

Dovid HaMelech (Tehillim 106) summarizes this failure with devastating clarity: "Vayim'asu b'eret chemdah, lo he'eminu lidvaro - they despised the desirable land; they did not believe His word. The problem was not only strategic hesitation; it was rejection. Eretz Yisrael, the land Hashem had chosen and promised, became in their eyes a source of dread rather than desire.

The pesukim in Tehillim continue: they grumbled in their tents and did not listen to the voice of Hashem. As a result, Hashem took an oath concerning them, that they would fall in the wilderness and that their descendants would be scattered among the nations. Where do we find that oath in Parshas Shlach itself?

The Netziv (in Haamek Davar) identifies a remarkable "needle in the haystack." After Moshe Rabbeinu pleads on behalf of Bnei Yisrael, Hashem responds with the familiar words, "Salachti kidvarecha," I have forgiven according to your words. These words introduce our tefillos on Yom Kippur night as we begin Kol Nidrei. But this forgiveness was not complete absolution. The very next passuk states, "Ulam chai Ani, v'yimalei kevod Hashem es kol ha'aretz." Literally, this means: "But as I live, the glory of Hashem shall fill the entire earth." Rashi explains that "chai ani" is a language of oath. Hashem is swearing. But what exactly is the oath? The Netziv explains that the phrase "chai Ani" does not merely identify the speaker. It expresses the greatness and authority of the One who speaks. Just as Pharaoh says to Yosef, "Ani Pharaoh," not simply to identify himself, but to invoke the power of his kingship, so too, when Hashem says "chai Ani,"

He is invoking His own kavod and majesty. And what is that kavod? "V'yimalei kevod Hashem es kol ha'aretz," the glory of Hashem will fill the entire world. Had Bnei Yisrael entered Eretz Yisrael with faith, Moshe Rabbeinu would have led them into the land, the Beis Hamikdash would have been built, and Hashem's presence would have radiated outward from Yerushalayim. The world would have witnessed the miraculous relationship between Hashem and His people from the center point of holiness, from Eretz Yisrael itself. That was Plan A.

But when Bnei Yisrael rejected the land, when they said "efes – but" the people are too strong, and when they allowed fear to drown out faith, Hashem revealed another path. If His glory would not be revealed through a nation living securely in its land, it would be revealed through a nation scattered throughout the world. Again and again, throughout Jewish history, we would become too successful, too visible, too envied. The nations would rise against us, try to destroy us, and yet Hashem would save us from their hands. This became Plan B. Hashem's glory would fill the world not only through the Beis Hamikdash, but through Jewish survival. Through exile. Through persecution. Through the impossible endurance of Am Yisrael. Yet Parshas Shlach also contains the seed of return. The sin of the meraglim was a rejection of Eretz Yisrael, but our avodah is to transform that rejection into longing. This idea appears beautifully in connection with the mitzvah of bikurim. The mishnah (Bikurim) describes how a person would go down into his field and identify the first fruits: "Keitzad mafrishin habikurim - how does one separate the first fruits? He sees a fig that has ripened, a cluster of grapes that has ripened, or a pomegranate that has ripened, and he ties a reed around it, declaring, 'Harei eilu bikurim - these are bikurim.'" The question is obvious. The Torah identifies seven special species of Eretz Yisrael: wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, and dates. Why, then, does the mishnah highlight only three: figs, grapes, and pomegranates? Rav Menachem Zamba explains that these three fruits are not random; they are precisely the fruits brought back by the meraglim. The Torah tells us that the spies returned with a cluster of grapes, along with pomegranates and figs. They used the fruits of Eretz Yisrael to frighten the people. Look how enormous they are, they implied. This land is not for ordinary people. It belongs to giants. Its blessing became, in their hands, a source of intimidation. The meraglim took the fruits of Eretz Yisrael and used them to degrade the land. Bikurim comes to repair that distortion. The Jew goes into his field in Eretz Yisrael and finds those very same fruits: the fig, the grape, and the pomegranate. But now they are not carried as evidence against the land. They are brought to Yerushalayim as an expression of gratitude, love, and yearning. What the meraglim used to create fear, we use to express devotion.

This also helps us understand a striking feature of the bracha of Me'ein Shalosh, the condensed blessing recited after eating grain products, wine, or fruits from the seven species. In that bracha, we thank Hashem for "eret chemdah tovah u'rechavah - the desirable, good, and spacious land" that He gave to our forefathers, "le'echol mipiryah v'lisboa mituvah - to eat of its fruit and be satisfied from its goodness."

At first glance, this is difficult. Is that why we long for Eretz Yisrael, merely to eat its fruit? The Gemara (Sotah) asks a similar question about Moshe Rabbeinu's desire to enter the land. Did Moshe want to enter Eretz Yisrael simply to enjoy its produce? Of course not. The fruit of Eretz Yisrael is not merely agricultural. It represents the kedushah of the land, the mitzvos hateluyos ba'aretz, and the unique relationship between Hashem, His people, and His land.

When we recite Me'ein Shalosh after eating from the seven species, we are not merely thanking Hashem for flavor or nourishment. We are expressing our longing for the full spiritual life of Eretz Yisrael, including the mitzvah of bikurim and the experience of bringing the first fruits to the Beis Hamikdash. Every fig, every grape, every pomegranate becomes a reminder of the great reversal we seek. The fruits that were once used to push the Jewish people away from the land are now used to draw us back. This is the

movement from cheit to tikkun, from rejection to yearning, from panic to faith.

And perhaps, in our own times, we are privileged to witness a further stage in that process. After centuries of exile, after the horrors of persecution and the devastation of the Holocaust, a remarkable transformation has taken place. More and more of Am Yisrael is returning home. The Jewish people are once again building, planting, learning, defending, and living in Eretz Yisrael. The world watches, sometimes in admiration and sometimes in hostility, but it cannot ignore the bond between Hashem, His people, and His land.

For so long, Hashem's glory was revealed through our survival in exile. But now, perhaps, we are beginning to return from Plan B toward Plan A. We are moving from dispersion back to ingathering, from wandering back to home, from the fruits of fear back to the fruits of bikurim. The meraglim saw the greatness of Eretz Yisrael and became afraid. Our task is to see that same greatness and become inspired.

May we merit the day when the longing expressed in Me'ein Shalosh becomes fully realized, when we once again bring bikurim to the Beis Hamikdash, and when "v'yimalei kevod Hashem es kol ha'aretz," the glory of Hashem fills the entire world.

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from: **Rabbi Chanan Morrison** <chanan@ravkooktorah.org>

date: Jun 10, 2026, 11:28 PM

subject: **Rav Kook on Korach**: The Corruption of a Judge 'Two Lawyers Conversing' by Honoré Daumier, 1808–1879 (Wikimedia Commons)

Korach: The Corruption of a Judge

What makes a judge dishonest? What are the cognitive stages in the corruption of a leader?

The Torah legislates support for the judges and teachers of Israel — the kohanim and Levites — through a system of tithes and gifts. This system provides them with a degree of financial independence, making them less susceptible to bribes and moneyed interests.

Biblical Scandal

Not every leader, however, maintains the standards of integrity that his public office demands. The Torah notes that the sons of the prophet Samuel did not follow in their father's path of selfless public service. On the contrary, "they went after gain, took bribes and subverted justice" (I Sam. 8:3).

What brought about their judicial corruption? What were the root causes? The Sages offered several possibilities for the failings of Samuel's sons. At first glance, this appears to be a litany of various abuses of power. A careful reading, however, will recognize a pattern in their statements.

Rav Kook explained that the Talmud describes a progression of increasingly serious offenses. The Sages were not disagreeing about the facts in the case. They were mapping out the moral decline of a leader, step by step, into the morass of deceit and corruption.

Here are the various opinions, as quoted in Shabbat 56a:

According to Rabbi Yonatan, Samuel's sons were not, in fact, guilty of any true crime. Their fault was in their failure to replicate the exemplary public service of their father. Samuel would travel all over the country, providing judicial services for the people. His sons, on the other hand, stayed in their own court, and "increased the fees of their clerks and scribes."

Rabbi Meir said: They would openly demand their salaries.

Rabbi Yehudah said: They compelled private individuals to conduct their business affairs.

Rabbi Akiva said: They would forcibly take an extra measure of tithes.

Rabbi Yossi said: They took gifts by force.

What is the significance of all of these offenses? Let us follow the descent of the crooked politician, as he slides into the cesspool of graft and corruption.

Down-to-Earth Leadership

We can learn much about genuine public service from Samuel. The Torah praises Samuel for traveling around the country and judging the people in their towns (I Sam. 7:16). Why was this important?

A true leader considers himself to be literally a servant of the public. His dedication to the community is reflected in his sensitivity to their problems and concerns. He governs and advises them, not according to his own station in life, but as if he is standing in their shoes.

This is the significance of Samuel's custom of judging the people in their hometowns. Samuel was able to identify their needs and challenges. As a result, his rulings were appropriate and his guidance was effective.

This type of leader is able to make a direct connection with the people. He does not need the trappings of officialdom. He does not surround himself with layers of bureaucrats and government officials.

Samuel's sons, however, failed to emulate this level of leadership. They would judge the people without leaving their city, without adjusting their mindset. In their eyes, they adjudicated properly. In addition, they required the assistance of a system of salaried clerks and scribes. As Rabbi Yonatan noted, this was not a crime. But it certainly falls short of the ideal of leadership as epitomized by Samuel.

#### Step 1: Just a Job

The other scholars taught that Samuel's sons were in fact guilty of graft. They described the various steps down the path of political corruption. Like all moral failings, abuse of authority comes in stages. Its danger and severity is magnified, of course, according to the power and influence of the position. The first failing may appear to be minor, but it is indicative of a problematic attitude that is the root cause of more serious abuse. A community leader, and especially a spiritual leader, should recognize that public service is a great privilege. This recognition should be strong enough to make one willing to forgo financial remuneration. In fact, a true leader, aware of the importance of his work, may even feel a certain degree of impropriety in accepting payment.

Rabbi Meir described the fault of Samuel's sons as "openly demanding their salaries." They failed to value the importance of their public service. By demanding payment, they showed that they looked at their work as a job like any other — and not a sacred calling that is its own reward.

#### Step 2: Using Others

From this stage, it is but a small step to actual abuse of power. Once a leader is no longer altruistic in his attitude towards public service, he will begin to see it as a burden. He will have no scruples about forcing others to handle his personal affairs. Since I take care of their needs, he reasons, why shouldn't they take care of mine?

This is the wrongdoing identified by Rabbi Yehudah: "They compelled private individuals to conduct their business affairs."

#### Step 3: Grabbing For More

From here it is another small step to the next level of corruption. Rav Kook noted that one who fails to live up to the moral demands of his position will ultimately sink below the ordinary standard of ethical behavior.

Leading and judging should be an inspiring vocation. A leader should feel that he is helping build a safer, more equitable society. In the words of the Talmud (Shabbat 10a), an honest judge is "God's partner in creation." But a flawed character, together with a failure to value his public work, will undermine the leader's sense of propriety and justice. Instead of values based on a sense of justice, he is ensnared by the glitter of superficial honors. His lack of integrity is expressed quantitatively — he takes "an extra portion of tithes" — as well as qualitatively — he takes it by force.

#### Step 4: Legal in Name Alone

As long as he retains some semblance of morality, such a leader will not try to seize that which he has no legal claim to. But his dishonesty may lead to the lowest level, when justice and propriety are empty shells, high-minded words lacking any true content. He views the judicial system as merely a tool to ensure social order. It has no connection to our aspirations for an ethical society.

This is the level described by Rabbi Yossi: "They took gifts by force." If they were taken by force, how can they be called gifts? This is a form of legal manipulation that is legal in name only. He may call them "gifts" or "contributions," but in fact they were taken forcibly. Calling them gifts only serves to silence what little is left of his conscience, allowing him to justify his crimes.

These are the stages in the descent of a judge corrupted by the lure of superficial honors and financial gain — a leader who should have been organizing society according to the foundations of justice and morality. (Adapted from Ein Eyah vol. IV, pp. 52-54)

from: **Michal Horowitz** <michalchorowitz@gmail.com>

#### Shelach 5786: **Bread of Faith**

June 11, 2026

Toward the end of Parshas Shelach, following the episode of the spies, the Torah introduces the mitzvah of hafrashas challah (Bamidbar 15:17-21).

Hashem commands: וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר, דַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם בְּבֹאֵם אֶל הָאֲרֶז וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְבִיא אֲתֶכֶם שָׁמָּה... רֵאשִׁית עֲרֹסְתֶכֶם חֶלֶה תְרִימוּ תְרוּמָה לַיהוָה - אֶל הָאֲרֶז אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְבִיא אֲתֶכֶם שָׁמָּה... Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them: When you come into the Land to which I am bringing you... from the first of your dough you shall set aside challah as a gift.

Rashi, commenting on the words "בְּבֹאֵם אֶל הָאֲרֶז" - when you come into the Land," notes that the Torah specifically connects this mitzvah to entry into Eretz Yisrael. Unlike other mitzvos ha'teluyos ba'aretz that became effective once the nation conquered and settled the land, challah would become an obligation as soon as the nation entered the Land.

What do we learn from the command of challah, which is chosen as one of the first mitzvos associated with settling Eretz Yisrael?

Perhaps the answer lies in the symbolism of bread itself.

Bread represents the most basic staple of human existence. It is the food that sustains life. Yet the Torah teaches that even before a person partakes of his bread, he must first separate a portion for Hashem (this was done by giving the separated piece of challah to a kohen). The message is clear: our sustenance is not solely the product of our labor, effort, or success. It is ultimately a gift from Hashem.

This idea is expressed beautifully elsewhere in the Torah. At the end of his life, Moshe reminds the Bnei Yisrael: וַיִּזְכֹּר וַיִּרְעֹב וַיֵּאכַל וַיִּשְׂבֵּעַ וַיִּשְׂבֵּעַ וַיִּשְׂבֵּעַ וַיִּשְׂבֵּעַ... לְמַעַן הוֹדִיעֶךָ - He afflicted you and caused you to hunger, and He fed you the manna... in order to make known to you that man does not live by bread alone, but by all that emanates from the mouth of Hashem does man live (Devarim 8:3).

The lesson of the manna was that physical sustenance is never merely physical. Bread nourishes the body, but its ability to sustain life comes from Hashem.

Furthermore, the Torah commands: וְאָכַלְתָּ וְשִׂבַעְתָּ וּבֵרַכְתָּ אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ עַל-הָאֲרֶז - You shall eat, be satisfied, and bless Hashem your G-d for the good land that He has given you (Devarim 8:10).

When a person is hungry, it is easy to turn to Hashem. The greater challenge comes after one has eaten and is satisfied. Success and abundance can create the illusion of self-sufficiency. Therefore, once we have eaten and are satiated, the Torah commands us to acknowledge the true Source of our blessings.

Perhaps this is the deeper connection between challah and entry into Eretz Yisrael.

In the wilderness, Bnei Yisrael ate manna that descended openly from Heaven. The hand of Hashem was visible each day. In Eretz Yisrael, however, bread would come through plowing, planting, harvesting, grinding and baking. Human effort would play a far greater role. The danger was that a person may begin to believe that his success is entirely his own doing. Therefore, one of the first mitzvos associated with the Land is challah. Before enjoying the bread that emerges from one's labor, a portion is set aside for Hashem. This act transforms an ordinary loaf into a reminder that all blessing originates with Him.

There is an additional dimension to the mitzvah of challah as well. The Torah does not require that challah be separated from grain growing in the field, or from individual stalks of wheat. The obligation begins only after the grain has been transformed into dough, when a portion designated for Hashem.

Perhaps this teaches that we are meant to recognize Hashem not only at the beginning of a process, but especially at its completion. We often focus on the finished product and take satisfaction in what we have accomplished. The Torah therefore instructs us that at the very moment we are ready to enjoy the results of our efforts, we must pause and acknowledge the Source.

In this way, challah becomes a powerful expression of gratitude. Just when a person might be tempted to say, "I made this!" the Torah asks him to remember that every stage of the process - the land, the rain, the harvest, the strength to work, and the ability to succeed - is from Hashem.

The mitzvah of challah teaches us humility, in addition to gratitude. It reminds us to recognize the partnership between human effort and Divine blessing. We are obligated to work, to strive, and to utilize the talents Hashem has given us. Yet we must never lose sight of the Source from which all blessing ultimately flows.

Perhaps this is why the mitzvah of challah continues to hold such special significance for us all, even in the absence of the BHM"K and through all the lands of our dispersion. Through a simple act performed in the kitchen, an ordinary loaf of bread becomes an expression of emunah, gratitude, and recognition of Hashem's presence in our daily lives.

May we merit to appreciate the blessings Hashem bestows upon us each day. May we never take our sustenance for granted, and may we always remember that while bread nourishes the body, it is Hashem Who sustains life.

And in this merit, may Hashem continue to bless Klal Yisrael with abundance, gratitude, spiritual growth, and lasting bracha. בברכת בשורות טובות, רשבת שלום, Michal

from: **Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald** <ezb@njop.org>

date: Jun 8, 2026, 3:17 PM

### **"The Ma'ah'peelim: Forcing Their Way into the Promised Land"**

(updated and revised from Shelach 5767-2007)

by Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

In this week's parasha, parashat Shelach, we read about the מעפילים-- "Ma'ah'peelim," the ancient Israelites who tried to force their way into Canaan after G-d had decreed that the people would not enter the Promised Land.

The story is well known. Moses sends twelve distinguished leaders to scout the land of Israel. Ten of them return with a negative report, saying that Canaan is a land that devours its inhabitants, is populated by giants, and that fierce and powerful people live in fortified cities. The negative scouts warn the Israelites that Amalek dwells in the South, the Hittites, the Jebusites and the Emorites dwell on the mountain, and that the Canaanites dwell by the sea. The ten scouts then declare (Numbers 13:31): לא נוכל לעלות אל העם, כי חזק הוא ממנו, "We are not able to go up against those people [the Canaanites], for they are too strong for us!"

The entire assembly of Israel weep all night and cry out to Moses and Aaron (Number 14:2-3): "If only we had died in the land of Egypt or if only we had died in the wilderness! Why is G-d bringing us to this land to die by the sword? Our wives and young children will be taken captive! Is it not better for us to return to Egypt?"

Despite the best efforts of Joshua and Caleb (the two scouts who dissented from the negative report) to quell the rebellion and to assure the people that a good land is waiting for them, the people, in a frenzy, prepare to pelt Joshua and Caleb with stones. Only the appearance of the glory of G-d, saves them. After pleading with the Al-mighty, Moses dissuades G-d from destroying the people instantly. G-d decides that, with the exception of Caleb and Joshua, all of the generation of men who had witnessed G-d's miracles in Egypt and in the wilderness will not enter the Promised Land. The Al-mighty instructs

Moses to turn away from the Promised Land, and journey with the People toward the wilderness in the direction of the Sea of Reeds.

When the people learn of the Divine decree to wander in the wilderness for 40 years, they begin to mourn deeply. They rise early in the morning, gather at the top of the mountain, and declare (Numbers 14:40): "We are ready, and we shall ascend to the place of which G-d has spoken, for we have sinned."

Moses warns the people not to transgress the word of G-d, for it will not succeed. He further admonishes them that G-d is not in their midst and that the Amalekites and the Canaanites are lying in wait to destroy them. Despite the stern warning, scripture, in Numbers 14:44, relates: וַיַּעֲפְלוּ לַעֲלוֹת וַיִּשְׁעוּ אֶת רֹאשׁ הַהָר, and they [the people] defiantly forced their way up the mountain, but the Ark of G-d's covenant and Moses did not move from the midst of the camp. The Amalekite and the Canaanite who dwelt on the mountain descended, and struck the People, pounding them until Hormah.

The commentators are perplexed by the severity of the punishment. Perhaps, they argue, the people (known historically as the מעפילים, "Ma'ah'peelim"), who had defiantly forced their way up the mountain toward Canaan to enter the Promised Land against G-d's will and had rallied behind the ten scouts and the evil reports, were now sincerely penitent, and regretted their previous rebelliousness, and now wished to enter Canaan with a full heart. After all, they forcefully declare, in Numbers 14:40, וְעַלֵּינוּ אֵל הַמְּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אָמַר ה', "We are here, and we shall ascend to the place of which G-d has spoken, for we have sinned!" Is it not true that the doors of repentance are never closed? If the sinners realized their mistake, why were they not forgiven? Why were they attacked so viciously by their enemies and destroyed?

Searching for an answer, our rabbis carefully study the "fine print" of Numbers 14:40. The verse does not actually state that the Israelites acknowledged their sin. In fact, it says, וְעַלֵּינוּ אֵל הַמְּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אָמַר ה'. The people themselves are not really contrite. They merely state that G-d said about them, that they had sinned. If they themselves truly felt sinful, why did they not clearly say so themselves, rather than simply quote G-d's description of them as sinners?

Furthermore, are the people now determined to enter the land because they are really motivated by love of the land of Israel, or is it simply because G-d had now said "no" to them?

The Dubno Maggid offers a vivid parable, that cuts to the essence of the issue. It is similar, says the Maggid, to a young man from a wealthy family who was offered a choice to marry either the daughter of another wealthy man or the daughter of a rabbi. The young man actually preferred the daughter of the rabbi, but insisted that he would marry her only if her father, the rabbi, gave him many precious gifts. Otherwise, he would marry the daughter of the wealthy man.

The rabbi rejected the conditions of the young man, stating that even if the prospective groom would reconsider and renounce his demands, he would never allow his daughter to marry him. He explained his decision by saying that the young man had now shown his true colors, that he does not truly value Torah, since he is prepared to marry the daughter of a wealthy man who is an ignoramus and bereft of Torah.

Similarly, says the Maggid, when the nation of Israel heard the evil reports about the land of Israel, they declared (Numbers 14:3): "It is preferable for us to go back to Egypt." This statement clearly indicates that the people of Israel did not truly value the land of Israel. Such a generation, says G-d, does not deserve to inherit the land, even though they are now regretful, and are prepared to go to Canaan. There is no point in going to the land of Israel now, since there is no sincere commitment to the land. G-d therefore declares (Numbers 14:29): בַּמִּדְבָּר הַזֶּה, יִפְּלוּ פְגָרֵיכֶם, "in this wilderness your carcasses shall fall!"

It is ironic, that the appellation "Ma'ah'peelim," has taken on an entirely new, heroic meaning in contemporary times. Despite the Nazis' unremitting efforts to murder all Jews, the British, who controlled mandatory Palestine, closed the borders of Palestine to all Jews, so as not to offend the Arab population. Refugees from Europe, desperate to escape their Nazi murderers,

during, and even after, the war, risked their lives by boarding rickety and unsafe ships like the famed "Exodus," in order to make their way illegally to the land of Israel, which was effectively blockaded by the British Navy. Hundreds of refugees lost their lives in unsuccessful attempts to reach the shores of the Promised Land. Thousands of others were intercepted. Some were sent back to die in Europe, while others were interned and arrested, both in Israel and in Cypress, where they remained until they were welcomed by the newly independent State of Israel.

The heroic efforts of the new "Mah'ah'peelim" were significantly different from the actions of their ancient counterparts. While it is true that the doors of most countries were closed to the refugees fleeing for their lives, they could still have tried a less dangerous course of action to sneak through the borders of other countries where they could hide or live. Yet they chose to risk their lives, determined to reach the shores of Palestine. In their brazen efforts, they showed their all-consuming love for the land of Israel. Israel was not their second or third choice, it was their first and only choice! Since, by their actions, the Ma'ah'peelim demonstrated that they were with G-d--the Al-mighty was with them! He responded by opening the gates of Israel to all Jews who wanted to enter.

May the Al-mighty rekindle the passion of the Ma'ah'peelim in our hearts today, and may the ultimate redemption arrive soon, in our days. May you be blessed.

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From: **Alan Fisher** <afisherads@yahoo.com>

Sent: Thursday, June 11, 2026 8:54 PM

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Subject: Potomac Torah Study Center Devrei Torah for Shelach Lecha 5786

As I have indicated the past few weeks, Miriam's tzaraat, Korach's rebellion, and the departure of the Meraglim all take place the same week, between 22 and 29 Sivan in the year 2449 (second year after the Exodus). The proof of the timing is in the Torah Anthology, vol. 13, pp. 333-35. Rabbi Yitzchok Magriso, an 18th Century author from Constantinople, studied and put together information from several sections in the Torah to demonstrate this timing. Why then did the Torah place Shelach before Korach? The answer, in the same source, is to tie the stories thematically. Miriam's tzaraat is a result of Lashon Horah. The Meraglim return and speak Lashon Horah about the land of Israel, falsely claiming that the residents are giants and that the land eats its inhabitants. Shelach concludes with the mitzvah of tzitzit, and Korach uses the blue die of one string of the tzitzit as the basis of his question to Moshe whether an all blue garment also requires tzitzit.

Moshe sends leaders of the twelve tribes on a diplomatic investigation of the land of Israel. The men, all leaders of their tribes, spend forty days openly touring the land and bringing back souvenirs. These leaders of the generation of the Exodus are not spies. They interact openly with the people for more than seven weeks – their position as leaders of B'Nai Yisrael is apparent to the people of Canaan. Moshe obviously fears sending these men and what they will report back to the people. He takes one precaution, changing the name of Hosea bin Nun to Yehoshua – adding a yud (for Hashem) to the beginning of his name – so Yehoshua's name would start with yud-hey (Hashem's name).

Rabbi David Fohrman and his scholars at alephbeta.org focus on connections between the story of the Meraglim and other stories in the Torah. One obvious connection is with the first war of B'Nai Yisrael, immediately after crossing the Sea of Reeds. Amalek attacks the Jews, focusing on the weakest members of the group, those at the back who have the most difficulty keeping up with the journey. Moshe has Hoshea select a group of men to do the fighting. Whenever Moshe has his arms raised, pointing toward the sky (Hashem), the Jews push back Amalek. Whenever Moshe's arms point down, Amalek pushes back the Jews. This pattern is an obvious signal that the Jews, until a few days earlier slaves for generations, have no training in fighting and could not defeat an experienced enemy army on their own. The former slaves are not doing the fighting – we only defeat Amalek

because God fights on our side. Hashem expects the Jews entering the land to remember the battle with Amalek (who live in the south of Canaan) and know that God will fight for B'Nai Yisrael. When the majority report of the Meraglim focus on the "giants" in the land and say that B'Nai Yisrael could not defeat them, Moshe and Hashem are both furious, because the Jews should know that God fights with them against Amalek and other enemies. One key question Moshe has for his diplomatic delegation is whether the land is good. When the majority report comes back that the land eats (kills) the people, Moshe and Hashem are furious. God has been promising the Jews since the days of Avraham Avinu that He would give Avraham's descendants a special land and that the land, full of milk and honey, is a very good land. In giving their report, the majority do not say that the land is good – they focus on the problems we would have defeating the Canaanites. Rabbi Natanel Kaszovitz (Auckland, NZ) seconds the conclusion that the land is very, very good – because it is our home, Hashem's greatest gift to B'Nai Yisrael.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, z"l, focuses on a lesson from the Rebbe – that the majority report reflects a fear of success, not a fear of the Canaanites defeating the Jews. According to the Rebbe, the leaders cherish living in the Midbar, where they live close to Hashem, study Torah all day, eat meals from Hashem, and avoid work that living in the land would require. Rabbi Sacks' response is that the mission of B'nai Yisrael is to create a model society with human dignity and chesed for anyone in need. A model society requires land, an economy, an army, flocks, labor, and an economy.

We Jews have been fighting for Israel for nearly eighty years – much longer counting the two thousand years praying and hoping to reclaim our land and country. The price is very heavy, especially with the loss of those who have fallen from attacks by our enemies. Fortunately the brutal attacks in the past nearly three years have brought Israelis closer and encouraged many Jews and especially Israelis to increase their levels of mitzvot.

The discussions of the Meraglim from my beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l, from more than a quarter century ago remain vivid in my mind. Rabbi Cahan brought out many insights from this parsha, including lessons from comparing this parsha with Moshe's repetition of the story in Sefer Devarim. Connections with language and situations in various parts of the Torah continue to fascinate me after many years of study. One of our most important tasks is to understand Hashem's lessons and teach them to our children and grandchildren.

Shabbat Shalom, Hannah & Alan

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**PARSHAT SHLACH**

What was so terrible about the sin of the "meraglim"? After all, they were instructed to report the facts, and that's exactly what they did! Furthermore, even if we consider their report as deliberately slanted, why was the entire nation punished so harshly for being misled by a small group?

Finally, even if the people's initial reaction was improper, immediately afterward they repent by declaring their willingness to take the challenge of conquering the Land! Shouldn't this repentance have been accepted?

Why then is "dor ha'midbar" [the generation of the desert] punished so severely? Why must Am Yisrael wander for forty years until they perish! This week's shiur examines this tragic event in an attempt to understand why.

**INTRODUCTION**

Before we begin our study, an important point of nomenclature. Although this event is commonly referred to as "chet ha'meraglim" - the sin of the SPIES, in Parshat Shlach they are NEVER referred to as such! Nevertheless, for the sake of convenience, our shiur will continue to refer to them as the "meraglim", even though their mission (as we will show) involved much more than just 'spying on the land'.

To understand the 'sin of the spies', we must first ascertain what their mission was. Therefore, our shiur begins with an attempt to identify its precise purpose by noting how the Torah describes this mission.

**TOURISTS OR SPIES**

In describing the mission of the meraglim, the Torah uses the verb "la'tur" (see 13:2,17 & 25). This verb can be translated as 'to tour' or 'to scout'. However, to arrive at a more precise understanding of what they were supposed to do, we must take a closer look at the psukim that describe their mission:

"And Moshe instructed them saying:  
And you shall see the LAND, WHAT IT IS -  
Are the people who live in STRONG or WEAK, FEW or MANY?  
Is the Land GOOD or BAD?  
Are the towns OPEN or FORTIFIED?  
Is the SOIL RICH or POOR? Are there TREES?  
[if so,] bring back samples of the fruit.. (13:17-20)

Clearly, these instructions entail more than a spy mission. Note as well that we find TWO categories of questions that the meraglim must answer:

- 1) Concerning the NATURE OF THE LAND -  
i.e. to find out whether the Land is good or bad, the soil rich or poor, the trees fruitful, etc.
- 2) Concerning the FEASIBILITY OF CONQUEST -  
i.e. to find out if the enemy is strong or weak, if the cities are fortified or open, etc.

These two categories show how this mission entails much more than the collection of military information. In fact, these questions seem to be describing a 'fact finding mission', much more than a 'spy mission'. Let's explain why:

A 'spy mission' is initiated when a military commander needs to acquire information (to prepare a battle plan). When doing so, usually a small group of men are sent secretly, and hence report back only to the military commanders (and certainly not to the entire nation).

Clearly, the mission of the meraglim in Parshat Shelach is quite different. These twelve men (a representative from each tribe) are sent publicly, by the political leadership to gather information for the entire nation. This information will help Bnei

Yisrael plan not only the conquest of the land, but also how to establish Eretz Canaan as their homeland.

[To support this point, simply compare Bamidbar 13:1-17 with 34:16-29, noting the textual similarities!]

**REALISTIC NEEDS**

To better appreciate the necessity of this mission, let's consider the realities that face Bnei Yisrael at this time.

Recall that the nation numbers over two million individuals. [This approximation is based on the extrapolation of the census figure of 600,000 men above age 20 (see Bamidbar chapter 26).]

This nation, living in camp formation for the last year and a half, has been able to survive the difficult desert conditions only with God's providence, i.e. His miraculous daily supply of food and water. However, these special conditions were only temporary.

Even though God had promised to bring them to a land 'flowing with milk and honey', their existence in this 'promised land' will no longer be supported by God's daily miracles. Instead, they will have to till the soil and work the land for their food. [See Devarim 8:1-10, re: the purpose of the manna!]

Similarly, when Bnei Yisrael will enter the land, they will have to fight their battles through natural means. Surely, God will assist them; but they will now have to undertake their own initiatives. [See Devarim 11:22-25.]

Therefore, at this time, Bnei Yisrael must not only prepare themselves to conquer that land, but they must also make the necessary preparations for all aspects of the establishment of their new national homeland.

Taking this into consideration, it only makes sense that it would be necessary to send a 'national fact finding' mission to help plan not only how to conquer the land, but also how to establish its borders and partition, as well as its economy and agriculture etc. Hence, the meraglim are instructed to scout the land to determine not only the feasibility of its conquest, but also how to prepare the land for its two million new inhabitants!

To support this explanation, note how the Torah describes a similar 'appointment of officers' (forty years later, when the next generation prepares to enter the land):

"And God spoke to Moshe: These are the names of the men through whom the land shall be apportioned - Elazar the Kohen and Yehoshua bin Nun. And one NASI, one NASI from each tribe... and these are their names..." (see Bamidbar 34:16-29, note obvious parallels with 13:1-16)

**UNDERSTANDING THE MISSION**

Based on this introduction, we can better understand the opening pasuk of the Parsha:

"And God spoke to Moshe... send one man from EVERY TRIBE, each one a chieftain among them... all the men being LEADERS of Bnei Yisrael." (13:1-3)

Due to the nature of this mission, it is necessary to send a senior representative from each "shevet" (tribe). Similarly, this explains why the meraglim report back not only to Moshe, but to the entire public. [See 13:26.]

Had they been military spies, they would report ONLY to Moshe (or to the military commander), but definitely NOT to the entire nation! Furthermore, had they been military spies, there would be no reason to publicize their names, and certainly no reason to send tribal leaders. Quite the opposite! It is because they comprise a FACT FINDING MISSION - specifically a group of national leaders are sent, who later report back to the entire nation (see 13:26).

**A PROOF FROM SEFER YEHOSHUA**

To clarify this distinction between 'spies' and a 'commission of inquiry' it is helpful to compare these meraglim to the meraglim sent by Yehoshua [see this week's Haftarah]:

"And Yehoshua bin Nun SECRETLY sent two SPIES from Shittim saying: Go scout out the land and the area of Yericho..." (Yehoshua 2:1)  
"... and the two men returned... and they told YEHOSHUA concerning what happened to them." (2:24)

Note that in Sefer Yehoshua the spies are actually referred to as MERAGLIM. These meraglim are sent SECRETLY (we are not told their names) to SPY out the city and report back ONLY to Yehoshua. Clearly, their mission was purely military.

To highlight this contrast, the following table summarizes the differences between these two missions:

sent by Moshe =====	sent by Yehoshua =====
12 men	2 men
Tribal leaders publicly	unnamed secretly
"la'tur" (to tour)	"I'ragel" (to spy)
the type of land, [its fruit, its cities etc..]	only military information

Yehoshua's meraglim serve as military spies to help him plan HOW to conquer Yericho. Moshe's meraglim serve as an inquiry commission, sent to provide the people with information to help them plan the establishment of an entire nation with all its institutions.

### ONE REPORT / TWO OPINIONS

Now that we have clarified the nature of the mission of Moshe's meraglim, we are ready to evaluate their report in order to determine what they did wrong.

Note that when the meraglim return, their report correlates perfectly with the double nature of their mission:

"and they returned to Moshe & Aharon and the ENTIRE NATION... and showed them the fruits of the land saying... it is indeed a LAND FLOWING WITH MILK & HONEY. Alas, for the people who live in that land are MIGHTY, and the cities are FORTIFIED... the Amalekites guard the south, the Chittites and Emorites control the mountain range, and the Canaanites command the planes..." (13:26-29)

Based on their findings, in regard to (1) the nature of the land, - the meraglim conclude that the land is SUPERB:

"and they showed them the fruits of the land saying... it is indeed a land flowing with milk and honey..." (13:26-27);

However, in regard to (2) the feasibility of its conquest, the meraglim conclude that conquering the people of Canaan appears to be almost impossible:

"Alas, for the people who live in that land are MIGHTY, and the cities are FORTIFIED... the Amalekites guard the south, the Chittites and Emorites control the mountain range, and the Canaanites command the planes..." (13:28-29).

These conclusions reflected the commission's MAJORITY opinion. However, Kaleb and Yehoshua presented an opposite conclusion. Based on the same findings, they conclude that conquest of the Land is possible: "it is indeed FEASIBLE to conquer the Land..." (13:30)

Up until this point, it appears as though this commission is quite objective; they report the facts as perceived. All twelve members concur that the land is good, yet the enemy formidable. However, two opinions exist in regard to the feasibility of its conquest: The majority opinion concludes that it is futile to even attempt to conquer the land (see 13:31), while the dissenting opinion, presented by Kaleb, argues that conquest is achievable (see 13:30).

The majority opinion appears to be logical and quite realistic. Why then is God so angered?

It is usually understood that the meraglim's sin stems from their lack of belief in God. After all, had they believed in Hashem, they would have arrived at the same conclusion as Kaleb and Yehoshua. However, this understanding may be overly simplistic. Is it possible that ten out of the twelve tribal leaders, after witnessing the miracles of the Exodus and their journey through the desert, do not believe in God and His ability to assist His nation in battle?

### NO FAITH IN WHOM?

There can be no doubt that the tribal leaders and the entire nation as well, believe in God and the possibility of Divine assistance. Unfortunately, they are also well aware of the possibility of Divine punishment. Let's explain why:

Throughout their journey, not only had God intervened numerous times to help them; He had also intervened numerous times to PUNISH them. However, the meraglim are also aware that to be worthy of Divine assistance Bnei Yisrael must remain obedient at all times. This precise warning had already been raised at the conclusion of Parshat Mishpatim:

"Behold I am sending a 'malach' to lead into the Land... Be careful and listen to his voice, do not rebel against him, FOR HE WILL NOT PARDON YOUR SINS, for My Name is with him. For IF you will listen... and do everything that I command you, THEN I will help you DEFEAT and conquer your enemies..." (Shmot 23:20-25)

This warning clearly states that God's assistance is totally dependent on Bnei Yisrael's behavior. Should they not listen, they will fall before their enemies.

[Note how the story of Achan in Yehoshua 7:1-26 proves this assumption. There we find that the mere sin of one individual led to the defeat of the entire nation in battle.]

One could suggest that the conclusion of the meraglim is based on their assessment that Bnei Yisrael are not capable of retaining the spiritual level necessary to be worthy of miracles while conquering the Land. Realizing that the conquest would only be feasible with Divine assistance, they concur that conquest is impossible. In other words, the meraglim are not doubting God's ability to assist them in battle, RATHER they are doubting their own ability to be WORTHY of that assistance.

So what's so terrible? Is it not the job of leadership to realistically evaluate all of the relevant factors?

### DIBAH - THE CHET OF THE MERAGLIM

It is precisely in this type of situation where leadership is critical! Ideal leadership should have challenged the nation to raise their spiritual level - to become worthy of Divine assistance - to rise to that challenge! The meraglim take a very different approach. Instead of rallying the nation to fulfill its destiny, the meraglim hide their spiritual cowardice behind a wall of hyperbole!

To support this point, note their reaction to Kaleb's 'dissenting opinion' (in 13:30), for it sheds light on their true character:

"But the people who went up with him said: We cannot attack that people for it is stronger than we. And they spread DIBAT HA'ARETZ among Bnei Yisrael saying: The land which we visited is one that DEVOURS ITS INHABITANTS, ALL the people who we saw there are GIANT... we looked like GRASSHOPPERS to ourselves, and that is HOW THEY SAW US." (13:31-33)

These are not the objective statements of a 'fact finding mission'! Rather, they comprise a presentation of hysterical exaggerations made in a desperate attempt to shape public opinion. A land does not 'devour' its inhabitants, nor is it likely that the Canaanites perceived them as 'grasshoppers'! It is precisely this rebuttal that the Torah refers to as "dibah" - SLANDER. Let's explain why.

Instead of confessing their true fear and lack of confidence in the nation's ability, they over-exaggerate the seriousness of the situation. Rather than encourage the people to prepare themselves for the task, they prefer to utilize populist politics and create fear in the camp.

Finally, note how the word "dibah" is central when the Torah summarizes their punishment:

"And those men - MOTZIEY DIBAT HA'ARETZ RA'AH - died in a plague before God." (see 14:37)

In contrast, Kaleb and Yehoshua exhibit proper leadership, as exemplified in their rebuttal of this argument. Note once again

how the entire argument hinges on Am Yisrael's special relationship with God:

"im chafetz banu Hashem" - If God truly wants us [to be His Nation], surely He will bring us into the land... only YOU MUST NOT REBEL against God, and you should not FEAR the people of the land for they are our prey... for GOD WILL BE WITH US - [hence] do not fear them." (14:8-9)

Unfortunately, the argument of the meraglim was more convincing, and the people concluded that attacking Eretz Canaan at this time would be suicidal (see 14:1-4). Considering that staying in the desert was no better of a long-term option, the nation concludes that their only 'realistic' option is to return to Egypt (see 14:3-5). The attempt of Yehoshua and Kalev to convince the people otherwise was futile (see 14:6-9). Bnei Yisrael prefer returning to Egypt instead of taking the challenge of becoming God's special nation in Eretz Canaan.

Based on our explanation thus far, only the meraglim should have been punished, for it was they who led the people astray. Why does God punish the entire nation as well?

To answer this question, we must return once again to an overall theme in Chumash that we have discussed in our shiurim on Sefer Shmot (see TSC shiurim on Va'era and Beshalach) and in last week's shiur on Parshat Bhaalotcha.

### THE LAST STRAW

One could suggest that the people's preference of adopting the conclusion of the meraglim reflected their own spiritual weakness as well. Undoubtedly, the slanted report presented by the meraglim had influenced their decision. However, since the time of the Exodus and throughout their desert journey, the people had consistently shown a lack of idealism. (Review once again Yechezkel 20:1-11 and our shiur on Parshat Va'era.)

Had the Land of Israel been offered to them on a silver platter, Bnei Yisrael most likely would have been delighted to accept it. However, once they realize that conquering the Promised Land requires commitment and dedication, the nation declines. This entire incident only strengthened God's earlier conclusion that Bnei Yisrael were not yet capable of fulfilling their destiny.

To support this point, note how the Torah describes God's decision to punish the nation in both 14:11-12 and 14:21-24: "And God spoke to Moshe - 'ad ana y'naatzuni ha'am ha'zeh...' - How long will this people continue to defy Me, and how long will they have no faith in Me, despite all the signs (miracles) that I performed in their midst..." (14:11-13)

And several psukim later:

"For all those men who saw My Glory and My signs in Egypt and in the desert, and they have tested my TEN TIMES, yet they did not listen to My voice. If they will see the land that I promised to their forefathers... [However] My servant Kalev will see the land, for he had a different spirit..." (see 14:21-24, read carefully)

Clearly, Bnei Yisrael's punishment is not based solely on this specific sin of the meraglim, but rather on their overall behavior since the time they left Egypt.

This also explains the obvious parallel between Moshe's prayer in the aftermath of this event and his prayer in the aftermath of "chet ha'egel". Then as well, God wished to destroy the entire nation, opting to make a nation out of Moshe instead; but Moshe petitioned God to invoke His "midot ha'rachamim" (attributes of mercy). This time as well, Moshe beseeches God in a similar manner; however the sin of the "meraglim" was more severe, and hence it is impossible to reverse the "gzar din" (verdict). Instead, it could only be delayed over forty years so not to create a "chillul Hashem".

Due to "chet ha'meraglim", God is convinced that "dor ha'midbar" would never be capable of meeting the challenges of conquering and establishing a 'holy nation' in the Promised Land. They are to perish slowly in the desert, while a new generation will grow up and become properly educated.

Based on this interpretation, we can explain why God was not willing to accept the repentance of the "ma'apilim" (see 14:39-45). Even though their declaration of: "we are prepared to go up and conquer the place that God has spoken of, FOR WE WERE WRONG" (see 14:40) may reflect a change of heart, it was too late. Had this been Bnei Yisrael's only sin, then most likely their repentance would have sufficed. However, "dor ha'midbar" had suffered from an attitude problem since the time of the Exodus (see Tehilim 95:8-11, Shmot 6:9-12, and Yechezkel 20:5-9).

Even after they received the Torah and built the Mishkan, their continuous complaining was inexcusable. "Chet ha'meraglim" was not an isolated sin; rather it became the 'straw that broke the camel's back'.

Bnei Yisrael may have been more than happy to accept the privileges of becoming an "am segula", yet they were not prepared to accept its responsibilities. God decided that it was necessary to educate a new generation instead.

It is not often in Jewish History when the opportunity arises for Am Yisrael to inherit (or return) to its homeland. The implication of such an opportunity is far greater than simply the fulfillment of "mitzvat yishuv ha'aretz" (the commandment to settle the Land), for it relates to the entire character and destiny of the Jewish people. When such opportunities arise, spiritual weakness should not be allowed to hide behind subjective pessimism. Rather, Jewish leadership must gather strength and assess the realities objectively while rising to the challenges idealistically.

shabbat shalom,  
menachem

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### FOR FURTHER IYUN

1. Note the parallel account of this event in Sefer Dvarim (1:22-24). There, they are called "meraglim" and only the military aspect of their mission is detailed. Relate this to the purpose of Moshe's speech in the 40th year and the fact that Bnei Yisrael are about to cross the Yarden and begin conquest of the Land. See also Ramban (Bamidbar 13:1), note how he attempts to combine both accounts.

2. All said and done, the obvious question remains, why does God command Bnei Yisrael to undertake a mission which may fail?

One could suggest that even though God has promised the land to Bnei Yisrael, He prefers that its conquest follows a natural sequence of events. Even though Yisrael enjoyed a supernatural existence in the desert, as they prepare for entering the land, they must begin to behave in a natural manner, as this will be the mode of life once they conquer the land. Now there is value in the fact that Bnei Yisrael participate actively in the process of "kibush ha'aretz", and begin to live like any normal nation by making decisions on their own.

This could be compared to a 'first step' towards national maturity. Just like a child's needs are first taken care of by his parents, and slowly he must begin to take on his own responsibilities, so too Bnei Yisrael at this stage. Unfortunately, it seems that this 'weaning' process began a bit too soon. Bnei Yisrael were as yet not ready.

3. Recall from last week's shiur that in the overall structure of Sefer Bamidbar, parshiot of mitzvot which would appear to belong in Sefer Vayikra often 'interrupt' the ongoing narrative 'challenging' us to find a connection. Review the mitzvot in 15:1-41 and try to find a thematic connection to the story of the meraglim.

1) The mitzvah of "minchat n'sachim" to be brought with korbanot Olah or Shlamim;

2) The mitzvah of taking challah;

Note that both these mitzvot begin with the phrase "ki tavou el ha'aretz" (when you come in the Land);

3) Avodah Zara of the tzibur and the necessary korban chatat (should entire nation sin);

4) Chillul Shabbat and its punishment;

5) Mitzvat Tzizit

- a. Attempt to relate these parshiot to chet ha'meraglim?  
(Compare both thematically and linguistically.)
- b. Where in Sefer Vayikra does each mitzvah belong?
- c. Recall the various mitzvot which chazal equate with keeping the entire Torah:
  - 1) Eretz Yisrael
  - 2) Avodah Zarah
  - 3) Shabbat
  - 4) Tzitzit

Could you conclude that Chazal based these Midrashim on the special structure of Sefer Bamidbar?

4. Note 15:22-23. Why is this pasuk referring to the transgression of all the mitzvot of Torah, while the chazal explain that it refers specifically to avoda zarah.

(Relate your answer to the previous question.)

How is chet ha'meraglim thematically similar?

# Parshas Shelach: A Weeping for Generations: The Spies and Tish'a B'Av

By Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

## I. TWO VERSIONS

As the Rishonim point out at the beginning of our Parashah, there are two different stories about the “spies” sent by Mosheh. The bulk of our Parashah (Chapters 13-14) is devoted to one story, whereas Mosheh’s “version”, at the end of the first chapter of D’varim, tells a different story:

Compare:

Send men to search out the land of K’na’an, which I am giving to the Israelites; from each of their ancestral tribes you shall send a man, every one a leader among them.” So Mosheh sent them from the wilderness of Paran, according to the command of YHVH, all of them leading men among the B’nei Yisra’el. (Bamidbar 13:2-3)

With:

All of you came to me and said, “Let us send men ahead of us to explore the land for us and bring back a report to us regarding the route by which we should go up and the cities we will come to.” (D’varim 1:22)

In D’varim, the idea of sending spies to check out the land was the people’s – acceded to by Mosheh. In our Parashah, it is a direct command of God.

In the D’varim version, the nation requests “men” to spy out the land. It would be reasonable to assume two or three men, since the goal was to “explore (spy out) the Land”; it would not be productive to send a stately entourage to accomplish this goal. God’s command, on the other hand, includes twelve “leading men”, one from each tribe (except Levi).

Another difference, one which helps us reconcile some of the others, is the verb used to describe the mission. In D’varim, the people want men to “explore” (\*lach’por\*) the Land. The implication is one of a military reconnaissance mission. In our Parashah, the verb used is \*latur\* (to visit/look over) – which implies much more of a “diplomatic mission” than an undercover job.

Indeed, if the sole purpose of this mission – as is commonly assumed – was to spy out the land in preparation for military action, there are a few components in Mosheh’s charge to the twelve princes that are unclear:

Mosheh sent them to spy out the land of K’na’an, and said to them, “Go up there into the Negev, and go up into the hill country, and see what the land is like, and whether the people who live in it are strong or weak, whether they are few or many, and whether the land they live in is good or bad, and whether the towns that they live in are unwallled or fortified, and whether the land is rich or poor, and whether there are trees in it or not. Be bold, and bring some of the fruit of the land.” Now it was the season of the first ripe grapes. So they went up and spied out the land from the wilderness of Zin to R’hob, near L’vo-hamath. (Bamidbar 13:17-21)

Why would they need to walk the length and breadth of the Land? (L’vo Hamath is in the north – far from their planned entry point into the Land). Why would they need to describe the Land – besides in military terms (e.g. “whether the land they live in is good or bad”) and why would they have to bring back fruit?

These questions become strengthened against the backdrop of Yehoshua’s spy mission into Yericho (Yehoshua Ch. 2 – this week’s Haftarah). He sent two men, who stealthily entered and exited Yericho, hid in the hills for three days and then returned with their report. The text does not identify them as “leaders”, they are not sent to walk the Land and to bring back fruit – and there are only two of them! What then do we make of this odd spy mission, described in our Parashah and in Parashat D’varim?

## II. TWO MISSIONS

In a beautiful essay (Megadim 10 pp. 21-37), R. Ya’akov Meidan explains the two versions of the story as follows:

There are two independent missions presented here. In Parashat D’varim, Mosheh recounts that the people were

motivated (probably by fear) to send spies – and, as the text there indicates – they were concerned only with identifying the best military tactic for taking the first city in the Land (akin to Yericho 38 and a half years later).

In our Parashah, on the other hand, God sends princes in order to stake a first claim to the Land – or, perhaps (as R. Meidan suggests) to begin dividing up each tribe's portion of the Land (thus explaining why Levi, who received no land, sent no representative). R. Meidan suggests that the flow of the four chapters leading up to our Parashah [the celebration of the Pesach (9:1-14), the descriptions of the Cloud of Glory (9:15-23), the description of their travels (10:1-28), the interaction with Yitro/Hovev (10:29-34), the mention of Mahn and quail (11:1-15), the introduction of support for Mosheh's leadership (11:16-35) and the ultimate statement about the singularity of Mosheh's prophecy (12:1-16)] suggest a strong parallel to the sections in Sh'mot leading up to the stand at Sinai. As such, he suggests, the forty days of the Divine mission to the Land parallel the forty days during which Mosheh was atop Sinai (perhaps the clearest parallel is the grievous sin of the people at the end of the forty days, followed by Mosheh's plea for forgiveness). Just as Mosheh stood atop Sinai for forty days in order to bring the Torah to the people, similarly, these princes went up to Eretz Yisra'el for forty days in order to bring the Land back to the people (thus explaining their bringing representative clusters of fruit).

R. Meidan goes on to explain that Mosheh combined these two missions (which, he suggests, may have been the reason that God disallowed him from entering the Land – see D'varim 1:37). As such, the twelve princes were sent to walk the length and breadth of the Land, to stake our claim to the Land and to each tribe's portion and to report back about the beauty of the Land. At the same time, they were to check out the defenses of the first route of military conquest and the first city they would conquer.

This explains Kalev's role in the mission – since he was the representative of Yehudah, he was the only one with any business in Hevron from the perspective of the Divine mission. All of the other spies went to Hevron in order to check out its defenses, as it was the first fortified city to be conquered – but Kalev went there in order to fulfill the mission of claiming it for the tribe.

[This is, of course, just a thumbnail sketch of the main points in his essay; R. Mordecai Breuer (Pirkei Mo'adot II pp. 409-456) adopts the same general approach, but develops the story and themes in a different manner]

### III. THE "MA'PILIM"

Picking up on R. Meidan's thread, I would like to raise another issue. The reaction of the people is hard to understand; indeed, they seem somewhat fickle.

When the spies/travelers reported the strength of the local inhabitants, the people wept, complained (again) about having left Egypt – and then utter words they had never before said: "...let us appoint a captain and return to Egypt." (14:4). Their fear and despondency led them to consider a plan to return to the slavery of Egypt (which, as R. Meidan points out, is a total rejection of "I am YHVH your God who took you out of the land of Egypt"). In other words, even though God had promised them this good land, they rejected it out of fear of the military conflict. Yet, when Mosheh recounts their punishment to them (14:28-35), they react in the opposite manner: "Let us go up to the place of which YHVH has spoken, for we have sinned" (14:40). This failed attempt on the part of the \*Ma'pilim\* is hard to decipher – when God commanded them to conquer, they ran away in fear; yet, when God decreed 40 years of desert-wandering, they suddenly became courageous and prepared to fight!?

In order to understand this, we have to go back to last week's Parashah and address a seemingly unrelated issue.

### IV. THE 'ANAN

In Parashat B'ha'alot'kha, we are given a detailed description of the Cloud of Glory that rested on the Mishkan:

On the day the Mishkan was set up, the cloud covered the Mishkan, the tent of the covenant; and from evening until morning it was over the Mishkan, having the appearance of fire. It was always so: the cloud covered it by day and the appearance of fire by night. Whenever the cloud lifted from over the tent, then the B'nei Yisra'el would set out; and in the place where the cloud settled down, there the B'nei Yisra'el would camp. At the command of YHVH the B'nei Yisra'el would set out, and at the command of YHVH they would camp. As long as the cloud rested over the Mishkan, they would remain in camp. Even when the cloud continued over the Mishkan many days, the B'nei Yisra'el would keep the charge of YHVH, and would not set out. Sometimes the cloud would remain a few days over the Mishkan, and according to the command of

YHVH they would remain in camp; then according to the command of YHVH they would set out. Sometimes the cloud would remain from evening until morning; and when the cloud lifted in the morning, they would set out, or if it continued for a day and a night, when the cloud lifted they would set out. Whether it was two days, or a month, or a year, that the cloud continued over the Mishkan, resting upon it, the B'nei Yisra'el would remain in camp and would not set out; but when it lifted they would set out. At the command of YHVH they would camp, and at the command of YHVH they would set out. They kept the charge of YHVH, at the command of YHVH by Mosheh. (Bamidbar 9:15-23)

In this description, we are told about the Cloud resting at one place "...for two days, or a month or a year...". Note, however, that this description is presented not only before the story of the spies and the consequent decree of forty years' wandering – it is also presented before the \*Mit'onenim\* and \*Mit'avim\* (beginning of Ch. 11). Up until that point, as is clear from the Torah's description of our travels (see Rashi on Bamidbar 10:33), the Divine plan was to bring us directly from Sinai into the Land – without stopping, resting or setting up camp. Why does the Torah describe setting up/breaking down the camp and the Mishkan – and why does it describe resting in one place for as long as a year?

## **V. THE ORIGINAL PLAN – FROM SINAI TO K'NA'AN**

Our question is predicated on an assumption which is borne out of the evolution of events in our history – but was not necessarily the original Divine intent.

According to the original Divine plan, as can be seen from our Parashah, the B'nei Yisra'el were to enter the Land directly through the Negev. Instead, as a result of the decree recounted in our Parashah, they were to wander for forty years. Ultimately, they crossed into the Land through the Jordan river. This crossing is clearly symmetrical to the crossing of the Reed Sea – where the \*'Anan\* (Cloud) first showed up. In other words, by dint of our entering the Land via the Jordan, the "Desert Experience" was bookended by these two "crossings-on-dry-land", such that the \*'Anan\*, which guided us to the Sea and through the desert, no longer led us once we entered the Land.

This was, however, not the original plan. The Torah tells us that: "the Ark of the covenant of YHVH traveled before them, three days' journey, to scout out \*Menuchah\* (a resting place); and the \*'Anan\* of YHVH was over them by day as they traveled from the camp." (Bamidbar 10:33-34). The Ark and 'Anan worked in tandem; the Ark being carried ahead of the camp, followed by the 'Anan – all to find "Menuchah". What is the meaning of "Menuchah"? As the Gemara in Zevachim (119a) explains, Menuchah refers either to Shiloh (the first place where the Mishkan was set up in a quasi-permanent fashion) or Yerushalayim. In other words, the 'Anan was not originally intended to lead us only into the Land; rather, it was to lead us while we encamped in the Land while fighting for conquest, which would certainly entail encamping at one place or another for longer than a few days.

This explanation of the "downturn" in our fortunes demands clarification.

## **VI. THREE LEVELS OF SHEKHINAH-INTENSITY**

When the Mishkan was dedicated, we entered into a relationship of intensity and intimacy with the Divine Presence (\*Shekhinah\*) that evoked that experienced in the Garden of Eden: Just as God is described as "walking in the Garden" (B'reshet 3:8), similarly, God promises that "I will Place My Presence/Sanctuary among you...And I will walk among you..." (Vayyikra 26:11-12). In other words, the promise of the Mishkan is a return to the close relationship which we enjoyed with God in Edenic times. We will refer to this promise as \*B'rit Mishkan\* – "They will make for Me a Sanctuary and I will dwell among them" (Sh'mot 25:8).

A second, less intense relationship, is implied by the covenant of Sinai. The covenant involves more than fulfilling Mitzvot and avoiding prohibitions – it involves a unique relationship, as described by the introduction at Sinai:

Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the B'nei Yisra'el." (Sh'mot 19:5-6). This is known as \*B'rit Sinai\*.

A final, much less intense relationship between the B'nei Yisra'el and haKadosh Barukh Hu is known as \*B'rit Avot\* (the covenant with the patriarchs). The covenants which God made with Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov are binding for all time and give us the Land and a populous people.

## VII. B'KHIYAH L'DOROT

### STEP ONE: B'RIT MISHKAN

Until we actually moved from Sinai, there was every reason for us to be able to live up to the B'rit Mishkan – for the 'Anan to be more than a guide, it would also be our protection in war. There was no reason for us to have to fight; just like when the 'Anan first protected us at the Reed Sea: “YHVH will fight for you...” (Sh'mot 14:14). This would have been the ideal completion of Sinai and the Mishkan – for us to march directly into the Land, with the Ark and 'Anan dispersing our enemies as we moved towards settlement.

This is the intent of the phrase, said by Mosheh when the Aron was taken out to war:

...Arise, YHVH, let Your enemies be dispersed, let those who despise You flee from Your Presence.” (Bamidbar 10:35). This phrase (and the next verse), however, is marked off by an upside-down Nun before and after – where do these symbols come from?

### STEP TWO: B'RIT SINAI

The next verse tells us about the Mit'oNeNim, whose name includes two Nuns in a row. These complainers weren't really complaining – they were \*K'Mit'onenim\* – “like complainers”. In other words, they had nothing concrete about which to complain; rather, they were looking for things to critique and fault about Mosheh's leadership.

How were they punished? “The fire of God burned against them” (11:1). What was “the fire of God”? – it was the Cloud! (see 9:16). In other words, as a result of the complaints of these people who could not stand the great proximity and intimacy with the Divine, the “power” of the Ark and 'Anan was turned against them – and, instead of the 'Anan remaining at the front of a war which we would not have to fight, it turned against us and could no longer provide protection. That is why the section of \*Vay'hi bin'soa' ha'Aron\* is marked off with upside-down Nuns – those are the Nuns from the \*Mit'onenim\* who turned the 'Anan (again, two Nuns!) from our “warrior” into our punisher.

Once this level of intensity – the B'rit Mishkan – was lost, we moved back to B'rit Sinai – where we are promised victory over our enemies and perpetual settlement in the Land (if we don't violate its sanctity too broadly), but we will have to fight for it ourselves. Coming into the Land on these terms would have been the completion of the Sinaitic experience. In order to “match” the stand at Sinai, the first enemy (as indicated in our Parashah) would have been Amalek, whose destruction would have meant the introduction of the Messianic era:

He said, “A hand upon the Throne of YH! YHVH will have war with Amalek from generation to generation.” (Sh'mot 17:16).

Commenting on this verse, R. Levi says in the name of R. Aha:

The Name is not complete, neither is the Throne complete, until the memory of Amalek is destroyed, as it says: \*Ki Yad al Keis YH\* (A hand upon the Throne of YH); it should have said \*Ki Yad al Kisei YHVH\* – but once the memory of Amalek is wiped out, the Throne and the Name are complete. (Midrash T'hilim 9:10)

**In other words, had we but maintained the level of B'rit Sinai, we would have entered the Land through the south, defeated Amalek and ushered in the era when “on that day, YHVH will be One and His Name One” (Z'khariah 14:9). The Messianic era would have followed immediately from Sinai.**

**This is why Mosheh sent the “scouts” on the Divine mission for forty days – to approximate the stand at Sinai.**

### STEP THREE: B'RIT AVOT

Now let's reexamine the people's odd reactions, opting for Egypt when God wants them to conquer the Land, then turning around and storming the Emorite mountain when God tells them to go into the desert.

What was the phrase with which the scouts introduced the negative part of their report? – \*Ephes Ki Az ha'Am\* – the word \*Ephes\*, which may mean “nonetheless”, is not easily translated. The sense of the word – and the entire report and the subsequent reaction – is one of choice: Shall we go up to this Land or shan't we? The feeling that there was a choice was

what directed the reaction of the people. This is often the cause of the success of outmanned and poorly armed fighters against more powerful enemies. When you are fighting with your back to the wall, and there is no choice (as the old Israeli slogan – " 'Ein B'reirah' (there is no choice) is our most powerful tool" attests), your fighting ability is greatly enhanced. On the other hand, when the fighting force feels that they don't need to win this war, defend this land, take this hill – they can be defeated (witness Vietnam).

When the scouts said \*Ephes\*, the people still thought there was a choice – to go back to Egypt and return to slavery there. What they (perhaps) didn't realize was that going back to Egypt was also a direct reversal of B'rit Sinai – of "I am YHVH your God who took you out of the land of Egypt". It was only when Mosheh told them of their punishment – that they would wander the desert for forty years etc. and that a return to Egypt was not an option, that they opted to take the Land. If their only choices were (certain) ignoble death in the desert or (possible) heroic death on the battlefield, they chose the (seemingly) heroic path.

They had already rejected the B'rit Mishkan of "walking with God" as evidenced by the Divine reaction to the Mit'onemim. Now they rejected the B'rit Sinai by expressing a willingness to return to Egypt. (This would explain an interesting textual difference between Mosheh's prayer here and the original of that statement in the aftermath of the sin of the Golden Calf.

Compare:

YHVH passed before him, and proclaimed, YHVH, YHVH, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and truth, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation. (Sh'mot 34:6-7) With:

And now, therefore, let the power of YHVH be great in the way that you promised when you spoke, saying, 'YHVH is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children to the third and the fourth generation.' Forgive the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have pardoned this people, from Egypt even until now. (Bamidbar 14:17-19)

Note that when God forgave the people at Sinai, He declared that He is \*Rav Hessed v'Emet\* (abounding in steadfast love and truth); when Mosheh "reminded" Him of this commitment, he said: \*Rav Hessed\* (abounding in steadfast love), but \*Emet\* (truth) was left out. Truth is the mark of Sinai, of the Torah which was given there. **Since the people had rejected B'rit Sinai, Mosheh could only point to \*Hessed\* as a Divine attribute which would save the people.**

**Now that they had rejected B'rit Sinai – all that they had left was B'rit Avot. They had, effectively, returned to a pre-Exodus mode of Divine promise. This explains the forty years of wandering – a micro-version of the 400 years of exile promised to Avraham (B'reshet 15:13). This also explains how their reaction to the scouts' reports, how their weeping on that night, introduced the possibilities of future exile into the national destiny.**

From the Mishkan, we were to "move" the Edenic reality to the Land. From Sinai, we were to (at least) usher in the Messianic era with the immediate destruction of Amalek. Both of these were lost. Once we go back to the model of B'rit Avot, we aren't encountering the permanence of settlement in the Land, rather the cycle of exile and return which was begun by Avraham (Haran, Israel, Egypt, Israel) and continued by Ya'akov (Israel, Aram, Israel, Egypt) and his children (Aram, Israel, Egypt). Once the people reverted to B'rit Avot, they allowed for the possibility that this upcoming entrance into the Land would not have the permanence promised at Sinai – but that the cycles of exile and return would remain our destiny until the final redeemer would come.

Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. Rabbah said in the name of R. Yohanan: That night was Tish'a b'Av; haKadosh Barukh Hu said: They cried for naught, I will establish for them [this night as] a weeping for generations. (BT Sotah 35a)

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## Parshat Shelach Lecha

by Rabbi Eitan Mayer

**Parashat Shelach reports the well-known, tragic story of the meraglim, the scouts sent by Bnei Yisrael to gather information (and fruit) from the Land of Canaan. We will not deal with all of the questions below, but they are all worthy of attention.**

1. Since Hashem has promised Bnei Yisrael that He will help them defeat the powerful Canaanites, why do they need to send scouts at all? What difference does it make whether the Canaanites are "strong or weak," or whether the cities are "encampments or fortifications," since no matter what the obstacle, Hashem will help them overcome it?

2. Furthermore, since Hashem has described Canaan to these people as a land "flowing with milk and honey," why does Moshe, in his instructions to the scouts, entertain the possibility that the Land is "ra'a," "bad," or "raza," "poor" or "thin"?

3. When Moshe gives the scouts their marching orders, he places a strange emphasis on one particular element. What is this element, and why does he keep repeating it?

4. On their return, most of the scouts report that the Land is unconquerable despite Hashem's assurances. In what will become a dreaded refrain as we move through Sefer BeMidbar and its many crises, Hashem becomes infuriated and threatens to destroy Bnei Yisrael and replace them as His nation with Moshe and his descendants. Moshe urgently pleads for mercy. Of course, we have seen this before: when the people worship the Egel (golden calf), Hashem threatens to kill them and replace them with Moshe's descendants, but Moshe defends the people. But there are important differences between these two events.

a. Here, **Moshe leaves out some of the key arguments he offers to Hashem after the Egel. What are those missing arguments, and why are they missing?**

b. Back in Shemot, Moshe first 'convinces' Hashem to spare the lives of the people, and then daringly and stubbornly engages Hashem in a campaign to achieve complete forgiveness for the people. But here **in Shelach, Moshe seems to give up after securing merely the people's survival. Why not go for complete forgiveness?**

5. **Moshe and Aharon react dramatically to the evil report delivered by the majority of the scouts. What do they do -- and what do they \*not\* do? Why?**

6. **Analyze Hashem's decree of the people's fate carefully. It seems highly repetitive. What are the different points Hashem is making in each of the similar phrases He uses?**

7. After Hashem's punishment is announced, the people realize they have made a mistake. They try to restore the situation to what it was before, but Hashem rejects their efforts and does not accompany them as they try to break into Eretz Canaan. Without His help, they are beaten back by the Canaanite nations. Why does Hashem reject their repentance? Isn't teshuva a fundamental concept in the Torah's theology?

8. **Just after the defeat of the people who attempt to enter the land, Hashem delivers to Moshe a series of mitzvot. Several of these mitzvot begin with introductions like, "When you come to the land that I have promised to give to you . . . ." How are we to understand what these mitzvot are doing here, especially with this sort of introduction, in light of the fact that the people being addressed have just been told that they will die in the desert and never see "the land that I have promised to give to you"?**

9. **What is the mitzvah of tzitzit doing at the end of the parasha?**

10. **As is the case with many stories told in Sefer BeMidbar, this story is repeated by Moshe several decades later, in Sefer Devarim. And, as is often the case, there are crucial discrepancies between the two accounts. What are the discrepancies, and how would you explain them? (This last question includes two questions: first, what**

really happened, and second, why does each sefer tell the story the way it does?)

#### PARASHAT SHELAH:

Sefer BeMidbar is the sefer of lost opportunity. The sefer opens up with great promise, as the nation's infrastructure begins to take shape in concrete ways:

1. Its needs for defense and aspirations for conquest are embodied in its army, supported by Hashem.
2. Its need for authority is supplied by Moshe, Aharon, the tribal leaders, the Elders, and the judges who share judicial authority with Moshe.
3. Its need for religious focus is answered by the Mishkan, and its need for a 'professional' religious class is answered by the Kohanim and Leviyim.
4. Finally, the nation's raison de etre is the Torah and the destiny it promises the nation.

But all of this promise is soon disappointed. Moshe urges the people to "aim high" and actualize the transcendent goals of "mamlechet kohanim ve-goy kadosh" ("a kingdom of priests and a holy/dedicated nation") -- the slaves are to transform themselves, looking above mundane matters and dedicating themselves to moral and spiritual goals. But the people see another set of goals for themselves: they do not trust the invisible God as Moshe does, and they do not trust the miraculous environment which supports them. For example:

1. The Revelation of the Torah at Sinai certainly impresses and frightens the people, but the impression it creates is ephemeral. Forty days later, the people violate the commandments they have heard by crafting an idol and worshipping it.
2. The people do not want the miraculous "manna" -- they want regular, natural food: meat, fish, the vegetables they remember from Mitzrayyim. The supernatural bread adds to the unfamiliarity of their environment, compounding their feeling of insecurity.
3. They are relieved, even awed, when the sea splits and drowns their enemies, but they do not process this event on the deepest intellectual and psychological levels. It does not convince them that they can depend on this Benevolent Power and believe in His promises. So when the "mon" indeed comes, they violate Hashem's instructions and gather more than they need for that day -- because they are not truly certain that the food will be there tomorrow.
4. The people are happy to have an authority structure, but they see this structure in pedestrian terms and its representatives as pedestrian in their motivations and ambitions. **Moshe, in their eyes, is not the Adon Ha-Nevi'im, the Master of Prophets, the Divinely appointed leader; in the eyes of many of the people (as we will see in Parashat Korah), he is a power-hungry egotist who has seized the reins of control for his own benefit! Similarly, Aharon is not the holiest of the holy, he is the simply the one who has successfully promoted himself by riding the idea of a holy class, an idea endorsed by his brother.**

**Moshe, as we discussed last week, is beginning to understand where the people stand.** The incident in which the people demand meat -- and begin to cry for it like babies -- leads Moshe directly to the image he later uses to describe the people, that of the "yonek," the infant suckling. In this posture, Moshe is sympathetic to the people's needs not because he sees their demands as reasonable, but because he sees the people as deeply immature. You wouldn't explain to a suckling why crying for food is inappropriate, and Moshe doesn't try.

But as time goes on and the people begin to turn against Moshe himself, Moshe becomes bitter; his sympathy dissolves and his patience turns to angry frustration. It is at this point, we will see, that Hashem tells him that he is no longer fit to lead the people into the land of Canaan.

#### THE SPIES:

Let us briefly summarize the parasha's account of the story of the spies:

1. Hashem tells Moshe to send spies to the Land.
2. Moshe chooses spies and gives them instructions.
3. The spies return and make their report, convincing the nation that conquest of Canaan is impossible. Yehoshua and Kalev attempt to counteract the effect of this report, but they are unsuccessful.
4. The people conclude that they cannot conquer the Canaanite nations and begin making plans to return to Egypt.
5. Hashem threatens to kill the people for their rejection of His promises, but Moshe saves their lives.
6. Hashem decrees that all of the people of military age will die in the desert.
7. The people realize their error, try to enter the land, and are beaten back.

#### **VERSION 2:**

Let us now briefly compare this account to the story in Devarim (chap. 1), noting only those points which are discrepant with the account in Shelah:

1. The people -- not Hashem -- propose sending spies, and Moshe agrees.
2. There is an explicit rationale to the mission: to find the best way to go up to the Land and the right cities to attack.
3. The spies themselves report only that the land is good, and seem to commit no crime. Instead, the people are blamed for rebelling against Hashem. The spies' report of the strong cities and giant people appears only in the complaining words of the people.
4. Moshe himself responds to the people's rejection of Hashem's guarantees, scolding them for their lack of trust in Hashem and offering examples of situations in which Hashem has supported them.

**The fact that there are discrepancies suggests two questions: What really happened? And why does the Torah tell the story one way in one place and another way in another place? How does the way the Torah tells each story reflect the theme of each book?** For now, we will hold these questions.

#### **COMPARE TO THE CALF:**

If we go back to the story of the Golden Calf, we notice a striking contrast between Moshe's behavior in that story and in our story.

When Hashem threatened to kill all of the people after their worship of the Egel, Moshe responded with three arguments (you might also read this as two arguments).

1. Relationship: he emphasized that Hashem had already established a relationship with these people by saving them from Egypt and performing miracles for them.
2. Reputation: he **asked rhetorically what the "public relations" effect on God's reputation would be if He destroyed the people** He had identified as His. Part of the goal of the Exodus was not just to save this particular nation, but also to introduce Hashem to the world and communicate His omnipotence and benevolence. His failure to successfully lead His own nation to freedom would throw His power (and goodness) into question in the mind of the nations.

**3. Commitments: Moshe focused on the promises Hashem had made to the Avot, Avraham, Yitzhak, and Ya'akov. Even if the present people deserved nothing, a commitment had been made to their predecessors to give their descendants the land of Israel; if God killed their children here, that promise would remain unfulfilled.**

**In contrast, Moshe here (in the aftermath of the spies' debacle) employs only one argument -- the public relations angle.** Why does he leave out the argument from relationship and the argument based on the promises? For now, we will hold this question as well.

#### **THE WHOLE NINE YARDS:**

Another question is also relevant here: **Why does Moshe go only so far as to convince Hashem to spare the people's lives, and not attempt to convince Him to forgive them completely?** A few months ago, when we discussed the aftermath of the Egel, we spent a lot of time looking at the extended and contentious conversation between Hashem and Moshe; Hashem would offer some sort of compromise to Moshe, and Moshe would refuse to accept anything less than Hashem's complete forgiveness of the people. In the final scene, Moshe is successful: Hashem agrees to completely forgive the people. As far as Moshe is concerned, continuing the journey through the desert was meaningless unless Hashem accompanied them on the way; until He agreed to to this, Moshe stood his ground.

On the other hand, in our story, once he saves the people's lives, Moshe makes no further effort. He seems to have no response to Hashem's decree that the entire generation of fighting men who compose the current army will die in the desert and never see the land promised to their fathers. Is this the same Moshe we know from Sefer Shemot? Where is the stubborn defender of the people, the implacable Moshe?

#### **PLAY IT AGAIN, MOSES:**

Another issue also seems troubling in our parasha. When Hashem announces His decree against the people who have chosen to believe the scouts' evaluation over His own promises to help them conquer the land, there seems to be much too much text!

#### **BEMIDBAR 14:21-35 --**

"However, as I live, and as the glory of Hashem fills all the earth, indeed, all the men who have seen My glory and My signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and have tested me these ten times, by not hearkening to My voice: if they shall see the land about which I swore to their fathers! All that have scorned me shall not see it! But as for my servant, Calev, because there was another spirit in him and he followed Me fully, so I will bring him into the land that he is about to enter, and his seed shall possess it. Now, the Amalekite and the Canaanite are settled in the lowlands; tomorrow, face about and march into the wilderness, by the Reed Sea Road."

Hashem spoke to Moshe and Aharon, saying: "Until when for this evil community, that they stir up grumbling against Me?! The grumbings of the children of Israel that they grumble against Me -- I have heard! Say to them: 'As I live' -- says Hashem -- 'if not as you have spoken in My ears, thus I do to you! In this wilderness shall your corpses fall, all those of you counted, including all your number, from the age of twenty and upward, that have grumbled against me. If you shall enter the land over which I lifted My hand to have you dwell in it! Except for Calev son of Yefuneh and Yehoshua son of Nun. Your little ones, whom you said would become plunder -- I will let them enter; they shall come to know the land that you have spurned. But your corpses, yours, shall fall in this wilderness, and your children shall wander in the wilderness for 40 years; thus shall they bear your unfaithfulness, until your corpses come to an end in the wilderness. According to the number of days that you scouted out the land, 40 days -- for each day a year, each day a year, you are to bear your iniquities, forty years. Thus you will come to know my hostility! I am Hashem, I have spoken: if I do not do this to this whole evil community that has come together against Me! In this wilderness they shall come to an end, there they shall die.'"

(Whew!)

Now, **exactly how many times does Hashem have to tell Moshe that the people will never make it to the land?** That their "corpses" will "fall in this desert"? That their children will wander for forty years? **Hashem's speech seems highly repetitive.** Doesn't Moshe get the message after just one or two times? Won't the people understand without a half-dozen repetitions of their fate? Let us now take a closer look at these pesukim.

First, just after telling Moshe that he has forgiven the people and has agreed not to destroy them, Hashem makes an important caveat: none of those who left Egypt and saw all of His miracles -- and yet chose to test Him and refused to place their trust in Him -- will live to see the land. But Moshe, it seems, has no comment.

Then, as if he has not just told Moshe all of this, Hashem seems to repeat the entire story: the Torah introduces Hashem's statement with another, "And Hashem spoke . . .", as if He had not already been speaking! Hashem then tells Moshe to tell the people that indeed, their fate will match their own predictions: they will die in this desert. And their children, on the contrary, will not die with them, and instead will take their places as the heirs of the land. Again, Moshe seems to have no comment.

Then Hashem repeats again that the people's bodies will fall "in this desert." And Moshe has no comment.

Hashem then repeats that their children will wander in the desert for forty years, until "All of your corpses are finished in the desert." Moshe has no response.

Then Hashem actually does the math for us, telling Moshe first the formula -- that they will wander one year for each day of spying -- and then giving him the grand total: forty years. Moshe has no response.

Hashem seals this decree with the final-sounding, "I am God, I have spoken," and then, for good measure, repeats once again (!!!) that their bodies will drop "in this desert" and that they will all perish here. Moshe, finally, has no response.

**Why so silent, Moshe? Why does Moshe ignore all of Hashem's hints for him to take the role of defender as he used to?**

#### **PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER:**

It seems to me that all of our questions so far point to the convergence of several phenomena in one tragic incident, exemplified by the snapshot of Hashem's conversation with Moshe.

After the Egel, Moshe faced Hashem as the bold defender, audacious and daring in defending his people, refusing to accept Hashem's proposal that he separate himself from them, obstinate and implacable in his single-minded insistence that Hashem forgive the people and return His presence to them (centered in the Mishkan). At that time, Moshe's energy was high and the people were relatively innocent newcomers to freedom and to monotheism. Moshe was sure that the people had the potential to make the jump from their current weakness to the lofty goals they had been called upon to meet; their idolatry was a moment of understandable weakness, a temporary lapse.

But by now, the situation is different.

**Moshe has lost his bold edge, beaten down by the people's repeated demonstrations of pettiness. Moshe no longer believes in them as fully as he did at Sinai. He is no longer confident that this people can form themselves into Hashem's special nation, that it can successfully shoulder all of the responsibilities such a task implies. He has not yet written them off, but the doubts are beginning to nag at him, as he witnesses their persistent concern for such lofty matters as "Give us meat! We're bored of just manna!" and their apparent blindness to the transcendent goals before them.**

**We know that before this sefer comes to a close, Moshe will have become so frustrated with these people that he will begin to call them names -- "rebels" -- and that his anger at them will so overtake his judgment that he will disobey Hashem and strike the rock. It is this incident in particular which leads to Moshe's replacement as leader**

by Yehoshua; it is not, as one might understand, simply because he disobeys Hashem that he loses the right to enter Eretz Yisrael at the head of the nation, but because his act reveals just how alienated from and frustrated with the people he will have become by then. Moshe could no longer lead the people because he had lost his faith in them; he had written them off in bitter disappointment, never understanding why their dedication did not equal his, why they could not trust Hashem as he did.

In our parasha, Moshe does not defend the people beyond saving their lives, does not insist that Hashem allow them to continue their journey to the land, because he has lost a great deal of faith in their potential to meet the spiritual rigors of this mission. He could defend the people only when he believed in them, but once his faith had weakened, it was all he could do to save their lives.

Moshe had indeed agreed to the people's request to send spies, especially after receiving Hashem's approval, because he saw it as an opportunity to increase the people's excitement about the land. If we look back to Moshe's instructions to the spies, he repeats one element again and again: "U-ma ha-aretz," "How is the land"; in truth, Moshe only gestures at real concern with the nature of the people inhabiting the land, the strength of their cities. He really wants to hear glowing reports about the land flowing with milk and honey, and for this reason he commands that the spies bring back with them some of the land's fruit. Although the people's motivation in sending the spies is military, Moshe sees only "The land." "Tell us about the land, about how wonderful it is! Bring back reports which will build our excitement and anticipation, which will reinforce our gratitude to Hashem!" Unsuspecting, he gives his nod to the plan to send spies, and appoints representatives of each tribe. The parasha begins in classic Sefer BeMidbar style, with a list: the list, in precise administrative order, of the names of the spies and the tribes they each represent.

**Moshe is completely blown away by the spies' report: he never imagined that events could take such a wrong turn.** But his silence in response to their defamation of the land is not simply a manifestation of shock, but an indication of his utter disappointment in the people. **Moshe falls on his face, the Torah tells us, and he has nothing at all to say.** Calev momentarily quiets the despondent, panicking crowd and directs its attention towards Moshe, but Moshe remains silent; Calev himself must deliver the pep talk he expected Moshe would deliver: "Let us go up, for we can certainly be victorious!" Moshe remains silent.

Moshe musters the strength to bestir himself and speak out when Hashem threatens to destroy the people, but this is all he can manage. Of course, the reason **Hashem tells Moshe about His plans is so that Moshe can intervene and "dissuade" Him from carrying them out. But Moshe plays the game only for its first round. When Hashem delivers the harsh decree, stating that all members of this army who rejected his promises will die in the desert, Moshe does not take the "bait."** Hashem begins again, repeating the entire story -- several times, as we saw above. But, in just another instance of the lost opportunities of this book, Moshe lets all of these invitations slip by. That he does not invoke the promises made to the Forefathers is no surprise, both because the promise will be fulfilled through the next generation, and because Moshe can hardly attempt to hold Hashem to the promise of giving the land to the very people who have rejected it. A look at the account in Devarim shows that Moshe does indeed respond, after a fashion, to the spies' evil report: he says, "Do not fear them," do not fear the powerful nations. But Sefer BeMidbar leaves this out completely, for it is such a feeble attempt to strengthen the people that it is as if unsaid. Instead, the Torah makes it sound as if Moshe maintains silence, and the only voice heard is that of Calev, who offers powerful encouragement, if in vain.

**One of the things the Torah teaches us here is a critical lesson about leadership, especially religious leadership: no one can be a leader if he or she does not believe in the people being led.** Moshe falters here, and eventually stumbles in the story of the hitting of the rock, because his faith in the people crumbles and his patience runs out. Moshe no longer believes that this people can achieve the mission assigned to them, so he can no longer insist that Hashem allow them to continue their journey. As we will see, Hashem's decree that Moshe will not lead the people into the land is not so much a punishment for his misbehavior as it is a recognition of a state of affairs: at that point, Moshe could no longer effectively lead, and there was no other alternative than to retire him. (The same, you may recall, happens to Eliyahu/Elijah: once his frustration with the people reaches the point where he considers himself the only one left who is faithful to Hashem, Hashem "retires" him and instructs him to appoint Elisha in his place as the next prophet. There, too, Hashem offers Eliyahu an opportunity to reconsider, just as Hashem offers Moshe opportunities here, but neither of them is able to take those opportunities and rejuvenate their leadership. Both are forced to retire and eventually appoint

successors.)

May we merit to have leaders of faith and patience, faith in our potential to meet the challenges facing us and patience with us when we stumble; and may we be worthy of their faith in us.

Shabbat Shalom

[note: emphasis added]