

Parashat Shelach Lecha 5770, 2010:

Spies That Failed to See

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Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel, Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

Imagine that we live in a world of universal peace and harmony and war is simply unknown. Try to envision a world where there is no *avodah zarah* (idol worship) wherein all mankind recognizes Hashem as the one and only G-d. Imagine, as well, a world where the *Beit Hamikdash* (Holy Temple) stands in its full splendor and glory, Israel is governed by Jewish Law (*Halacha*), the *Sanhedrin* (Supreme Court) renders ultimate judgment, and anti-Semitism is not even a thought. All of this, and so much more, is precisely the kind of world that would have come into being if the events of this week's *parasha* (Torah portion) had never taken place. *L'tzareinu harav* (to our immeasurable misery), however, "the greatest misfortune in human history took place" (Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, 1903-1993, source: 1979 public lecture). As a result, the Torah's messianic vision was not realized, and remains unfilled until our own moment in time.

The beginning of our *parasha* offered the possibility for the immediate implementation of Judaism's unique eschatological goals. Moshe would have been *Mashiach* (the one true Messiah), he would have led our people into *Eretz Yisrael* (the Land of Israel), the *Beit Hamikdash* would have been built and remained intact forevermore, and the entire world would have recognized the truth of monotheism and our people's singular responsibilities

as G-d's chosen nation.

What exactly took place that so violently, and nearly irrevocably, brought G-d's plan to a screeching halt? The answer is starkly clear: Our people failed to live up to Hashem's legitimate expectations, and the goals He had established for us. Rashi (1040-1105) teaches us that Moshe, as a compromise to the people's nagging insecurity and immature *emunah* (faith), sent the leaders of each tribe to do a thorough reconnaissance of the Land:

Send for yourself: According to your own understanding. I am not commanding you, but if you wish, you may send. Since the Israelites had come [to Moses] and said, "Let us send men ahead of us," as it says, "All of you approached me..." (*Sefer Devarim* 1:22, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

At first, everything went quite well. After all, these were mighty and prestigious men who seemed bent on performing the task set before them:

These are their names: For the tribe of Reuben, Shammua the son of Zakkur. For the tribe of Simeon, Shaphat the son of Hori. For the tribe of Judah, Caleb the son of Jepphuneh. For the tribe of Issachar, Yigal the son of Joseph. For the tribe of Ephraim, Hoshea the son of Nun. For the tribe of Benjamin, Palti the son of Raphu. For the tribe of Zebulun, Gaddiel the son of Sodi. For the tribe of Joseph, the tribe of Manasseh, Gaddi the son of Susi. For the tribe of Dan, Ammiel the son of Gemalli. For the tribe of Asher, Sethur the son of Michael. For the tribe of Naphtali, Nahbi the son of Vophsi. For the tribe of Gad, Geuel the son of Machi. (*Sefer Bamidbar* 13:4-15)

These great tribal princes are called "*anashim*" ("men"). Rashi suggests that this was an honorific appellation based on the *Midrash Tanchuma's* interpretation of *Sefer Bamidbar* 13:3: "Every instance of the term *anashim* that appears in the text of the Torah is a term of distinction [literally, importance]. At that time they were righteous." These men were unquestionably the great leaders of the *Dor Hamidbar* (the Generation of the Desert). Their task regarding *Eretz Yisrael* was defined as one of exploring, searching, examining,

and discovery. Thus, in 13:2, 13: 21, and 13:25, we find the expressions “v’yaturu,” “vayaturu,” and “meture” - all terms of exploration and discovery. In addition, the infinitive form of this verb - “latur” (to seek out or to discover) is found in 13:16.

Unfortunately, however, something went terribly wrong. Inexplicably, these great leaders, with the exception of Caleb and Hoshea (Joshua), ceased to be *anashim* and morphed into something else entirely: *meraglim* (spies). This transformation is clearly represented in the first chapter of *Sefer Devarim* in verses 20-24:

And I said to you, “You have come to the mountain of the Amorites, which the L-d, our G-d, is giving us. Behold, the L-d, your G-d, has set the land before you; go up and possess it, as the L-d, G-d of your fathers has spoken to you; you shall neither fear nor be dismayed.” And all of you approached me and said, “Let us send men ahead of us so that they will search out the land for us and bring us back word by which route we shall go up, and to which cities we shall come.” And the matter pleased me; so I took twelve men from you, one man for each tribe. And they turned and went up to the mountain, and they came to the valley of Eshkol **and spied it out.**

The *Meraglim* failed to maintain the proper perspective. Therefore, they squandered one of the greatest opportunities ever given to mankind. Instead of fulfilling their mission of exploration and discovery – guided by a sense of serving Hashem - they acted like lowly spies on a “black-ops” military mission (*v’yiraglu otah*).

The *Meraglim* looked at everything through the lens of the laws of Nature, and completely forgot that the Jewish people were G-d’s *Am Hanivchar* (Chosen People). Moreover, they failed to understand that our entire existence was solely a result of our being directly *tachat kanfei HaShechinah* (under the divine wings of protection of the Almighty). As a result, they saw their role exclusively as a military mission, instead of an opportunity to be *mekadash shame shamayim* (sanctify Hashem’s name) by properly

fulfilling their mandate from Moshe. Little wonder then, that the *Meraglim* returned to the people and issued a report that focused upon what they saw, i.e. “the facts on the ground” – rather than upon the potential of that which might be. In short, their myopic vision prevented them from seeing a glorious and G-d-inspired future.

The people’s response to the Spies’ report changed the course of history:

The entire community raised their voices and shouted, and the people wept on that night. All the children of Israel complained against Moses and Aaron, and the entire congregation said, “If only we had died in the land of Egypt, or if only we had died in this desert. Why does the L-rd bring us to this land to fall by the sword; our wives and children will be as spoils. Is it not better for us to return to Egypt?” They said to each other, “Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt!” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 14:1-4)

In turn, our forebears’ near complete capitulation was met by swift and angry words from G-d:

The L-rd said to Moses, “How long will this people provoke Me? How much longer will they not believe in Me after all the signs I have performed in their midst? I will strike them with a plague and annihilate them; then I will make you into a nation, greater and stronger than they.” (*Ibid.*, 11-12)

Once again, Moshe interceded and saved our nation from extermination – this, in part, is why we exist today:

Now, please, let the strength of the L-rd be increased, as You spoke, saying. “The L-rd is slow to anger and abundantly kind, forgiving iniquity and transgression, Who cleanses [some] and does not cleanse [others], Who visits the iniquities of parents on children, even to the third and fourth generations.” Please forgive the iniquity of this nation in accordance with your abounding kindness, as You have borne this people from Egypt until now.” And the L-rd said, “I have forgiven them in accordance with your word.” (*Ibid.*, 17-20)

Mishnah Taanit 4:6, and the subsequent discussion in the Babylonian Talmud, teach us that the Spies returned from their journey to *Eretz Yisrael* on the night of Tisha b’Av. Although the people were saved through Moshe’s intercession, their ignominious

response to the *Meraglim*'s report led directly to the divine decree that forbade the *Dor Hamidbar* (Generation of the Desert) from entering the Promised Land: “*B’tisha b’Av nigzar al avotainu she’lo yichnasu l’aretz.*” In pathos-packed prose our Sages note that *lail Tisha b’Av* (the night of the 9th of Av) was set aside for destruction ever since that wretched time. Indeed, both *Batei Mikdash* (Holy Temples) were destroyed on this day (586 BCE and 70 CE respectively). Then, too, the Spanish Expulsion (1492) and World War I (1914-1919) - which arguably laid the foundations for World War II and the Holocaust - both began on this most ill-fated of days. Amidst immeasurable rivers of blood and uncountable tears, the monumental failure of the Spies, their ill-begotten report, and the infantile and faithless reaction of our ancestors continue to reverberate until our own day.

We live in an age of *pirood* (separation) and *sinat chinam* (groundless hatred). Each one of us, even if we do not label ourselves, is labeled and defined by others as to what kind of Jew we are and where we stand on the religious/non-religious/not-yet-religious spectrum. The result of this kind of thinking is alienation and disaffection from our fellow Jews. Instead of banding together in *achdut* (unity) and tolerance, we distrust one another and treat other Jews who are different than ourselves as being somehow less than who we perceive ourselves to be. I believe that we can rightfully view this as “*Meraglim*-thinking,” since this is the exact kind of behavior that our ancestors manifested when both Kalev (Caleb) and Yehoshua (Joshua) disagreed with the Spies’ report. This is clearly seen when the people threatened to murder Kalev and Yehoshua on the spot:

Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had

scouted the land, tore their clothes. They spoke to the entire congregation of the children of Israel, saying, "The land we passed through to scout is an exceedingly good land. If the L-rd desires us, He will bring us to this land and give it to us, a land flowing with milk and honey. But you shall not rebel against the L-rd, and you will not fear the people of that land for they are [as] our bread. Their protection is removed from them, and the L-rd is with us; do not fear them." The entire congregation threatened to pelt them with stones, but the glory of the L-rd appeared in the Tent of Meeting to all the children of Israel. (*Sefer Bamidbar* 14:6-10, underlining my own)

Given all of the above, I believe that one of our main tasks as Jews today is to reject “*Meraglim*-thinking” out of hand and embrace an entirely different mode of behavior. To this end, we need to focus upon the famous idea of Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Kook *zatzal* (1865-1935): “Since the Second *Beit Hamikdash* was destroyed as a result of *sinat chinam*, we must embrace our fellow Jews in *ahavat chinam* (love without cause) in order to establish the foundations of the Third *Beit Hamikdash*.” With G-d's help, may we be *zocheh* (merit) to integrate Rav Kook's words into our lives, and thereby hasten the arrival of *Mashiach Tzidkeinu* (the Righteous Messiah) soon and in our time. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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http://home.mindspring.com/~rdbe/parashat_hashavuah/index.html.

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