

Parashat Shelach Lecha 5779, 2019:

Spies and Tears

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof and Pittsburgh, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yakir Ephraim ben Rachel Devorah, Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Imagine that we live in a world of universal peace and harmony, in which war is simply unknown and there is no *avodah zarah* (idol worship). Moreover, picture a time when the *Beit Hamikdash* (Holy Temple) stands in all its glory, Israel is governed by Jewish Law (*Halacha*), the *Sanhedrin* (Supreme Court) renders ultimate judgment and anti-Semitism is not even a thought. As *Chazal* (our Sages of blessed memory) teach us in multiple sources, the beginning of our *parasha* offers the possible fulfillment of these messianic visions. In theory, Moshe could have been *Mashiach* (the Messiah), led our people into *Eretz Yisrael* and built the eternal *Beit HaMikdash*. Then, the entire world would have recognized the truth of monotheism and our people's singular role as Hashem's chosen nation.

What exactly took place that brought these magnificent plans to a screeching halt? In his *Commentary on the Torah*, the Ramban *zatzal* (Nachmanides, 1194-1270) suggests that this was a direct result of the people's reaction to the *Meraglims'* (Spies') report concerning the seeming impossibility of conquering *Eretz Yisrael* as found in our *parasha*. In addition, we must remember that *Chazal* teach us that this poignant episode transpired on the night

of *Tisha b'Av*:

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, translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Rabbi Isaac ben Moses Arama (known as the Akeidat Yitzhak, 1420-1494) was a great Spanish exegete. In his Torah commentary on our *parasha*, *Akeidat Yitzhak*, Rav Arama suggests that the final verse of our passage contains the key for understanding the completely negative valence of our forebears' response:

They [the people] rejected the Land of Divine promise. It is this rejection of the land which has been our undoing throughout the ages. On account of it, we were exiled from our country, divorced from our soil, and became a reproach to our neighbors, a scorning and a derision to those round about us. There is no way of restoring our integrity other than by returning unto it. (This and the following translations, Aryeh Newman in, Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Bamidbar*, pages 145-146)

At this juncture, Rav Arama asks, and answers, a powerful question as to why our ancestors' behavior eventuated in the permanent ban on the men of this generation — though not the continuously loyal women — from entering *Eretz Yisrael*. In so doing, he helps us understand our seemingly never-ending years of *Galut* (Exile):

What was the reason for the terrible wrath of the Almighty in giving forth this irrevocable decree? What should it matter to the Holy One blessed be He that they rejected a goodly land, a land flowing with milk and honey? Surely all these goods are only transitory!

But the truth is that it was not [only] these earthly things that they rejected, rather they rejected Hashem, they despised the Holy One of Israel who granted them life and its joys, surrounded by the precepts of the Torah... They retreated saying, "We cannot go up," implying that they did not desire to scale the heights of *spiritual* perfection, the ladder to which was the Holy Land itself, but preferred to choose a leader and go back to Egypt, descending to an impure land. (With my emendations)

Based upon Rav Arama's trenchant insights, we can now summarize the two-part sin of the *Meraglim* and the people's response to their report: the rejection of the Land of Divine promise, and the repudiation of Hashem and His holy Torah. In a very real sense, our forbears' rejection of the land represented the worst form of *kafui tovah* — rejection of the good. Finally, the moment was at hand and *Eretz Yisrael* was all-but in our grasp. Hashem's beneficence was boundless, and His *rachamim* (mercy) unending, yet we rejected both our Creator and His unlimited *chesed* (kindness).

Beyond a doubt, our ancestors cried for no reason, and it is precisely these causeless bitter tears that have stained our relationship with the Almighty until today. May the Master of the Universe help us truly appreciate the untold wonder of our beloved land, and give us the wisdom to once again cry unto Him: "Cause us to return to You Hashem so that we may return, and renew our days as they were in earlier times." (*Megillat Eichah* 5:21, translation my own) May this time come soon, and in our days, *v'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>
They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org/> using the search criteria Etengoff and the *parasha's* name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's English language audio shiurim** (MP3 format)

spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.