

Parashat Shelach: Lack of Confidence, Lack of Faith

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I. Tourists or Spies

The "*chet ha-meraglim*," the sin of the spies, was not only the most catastrophic episode to befall the Jewish People in the desert, but also one of the most significant and influential occurrences in all of Jewish history.

In analyzing this episode, our point of departure must be the events we read about in last week's *parasha*; the *chet ha-meraglim* did not occur in a historical vacuum, but rather constituted a critical and dramatic link in a chain of events. It would be misleading to remove the *chet ha-meraglim* from the flow of events preceding and succeeding it by taking it out of its historical context and treating it as the singular point of failure of the generation of the exodus.

In last week's *shiur*, we traced the process of the deterioration of "*machane Yisrael*." We focused upon three domains: the general population, the leadership, and the stature of Moshe. In this week's *parasha*, we find that the decline in these three areas deepens, converging with tragic force as the structure of the "*machane*" collapses.

Our *parasha* begins with the divine command to send spies into Canaan on a fact-finding mission.

Send out men to scout the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the people of Israel; send one man from each of their ancestral tribes, each one a chieftain among them. ([Bamidbar 13:2](#))

The *midrash* notes the discrepancy between this account and Moshe's rendition in *Sefer Devarim*, according to which the people, not God, requested that spies be sent:

Then all of you came to me and said, □Let us send men ahead to reconnoiter the land for us..." ([Devarim 1:22](#))

In addition, the *gemara* (*Sota* 34b) points to the oddity of the term "*lekha*" ("Send FOR YOU"), which indicates a personal objective and seems out of place within the context of a divine imperative. Based on these two observations, the *midrash* and the *gemara* conclude that the idea of sending spies was initiated by the people; God merely consented to their whim. In the words of Rashi ([Bamidbar 13:2](#)):

"Send for you□ □ of your own accord. I am not commanding you to do so, but if you wish, then send. For the Jews came and said, □Let us send men ahead,□ and Moshe consulted the Almighty. God said: I have already told them that the land is good... I will give them room to be led astray by the words of the spies so that they will not inherit the land."

This observation of our Sages highlights the sharpness of the transition that has transpired. The tension and excitement generated by the awareness that Jewish destiny was about to be realized have disappeared. *Bnei Yisrael* are no longer consumed by the burning desire to enter *Eretz Yisrael*, but are rather presented now as hesitant and insecure, afraid to blindly follow the Almighty. They require an encouraging report from their peers and leaders in order to continue the campaign.

Moreover, until this point, the delays in the journey were divinely imposed. Suddenly, separated by a mere eight-day march from the Promised Land, the people themselves engineer a postponement. One can sense a collective silent sigh of relief as God agrees to their request and delays the journey an additional forty days.

Moshe selects one leader from each tribe to undertake this mission. At first glance, this is a perplexing choice; communal leaders make for poor spies! Furthermore, a group of twelve foreigners is apt to attract attention. One gets the impression that Moshe intended a ceremony, not a clandestine operation. In fact, the Ramban notes that in their original request ([Devarim 1:22](#)), *Bnei Yisrael* use the term "*ve-yachperu*," which denotes uncovering that which is hidden (that is, spying). However, God assents by utilizing the verb "*ve-yaturu*" ([Bamidbar 13:2](#)), which suggests a more leisurely trip.

This observation indicates that the people's request was not fulfilled totally. Whereas the people, due to lack of confidence and imperfect faith, conceived an undercover mission, God revised the objective and granted permission for a triumphant pilot trip. Moshe's choice of tribal leaders was

a clear indication of this new agenda. However, with the exception of Calev and Yehoshua, these leaders failed miserably in their mission. Instead of inspiring the people and instilling them with faith and confidence, the scouts acted as spies, not as tourists, and they aroused the fear that had lain dormant in the unbelieving hearts of the nation.

At this point, we find the *machane* in total disarray. Overcome by grief and fear, the people are willing to reject the entire redemption process and return to slavery in Egypt. Even Moshe, who saved the nation from suffering and bondage with a spectacular display of miracles, stands powerless. His stature has been tarnished. The nation's total confidence in him and absolute respect for him, displayed just one year ago at the shores of the Red Sea □ "...they had faith in God and in His servant Moshe" ([Shemot 14:31](#)) □ is replaced by a mutinous call □ "Let us appoint a leader and head back to Egypt" ([Bamidbar 14:4](#)). The voices of Yehoshua and Calev are drowned out by threats of violence, and only divine intervention prevents bloodshed.

The "*machane*" which was constructed with such precision at the beginning of "*Chumash Ha-pekudim*" has collapsed. The multi-colored social fabric has unraveled. The general population and the leadership □ including Moshe Rabbeinu □ is malfunctioning.

Directionless and shattered, the entire generation that had experienced redemption and witnessed God's miracles is now doomed to perish in the wilderness. The "*machane*" which was intended to reflect the incarnation of the ideal religious community and realize the fulfillment of the messianic dream will never enter the Promised Land. The 600,000 who were enumerated and enlisted as part of *Knesset Yisrael* are now destined to be buried in the desert.

II. A Strange Redundancy

However, there is something strange about God's reaction. God's response contains a troublesome redundancy, appearing to repeat the divine decree that the generation that left Egypt will perish in the wilderness. First, we read:

And Hashem said to Moshe: □ How long will this people spurn Me, and how long will they have no faith in Me despite all the signs that I have performed in their midst? I will strike them with pestilence and destroy them...□

[Moshe then prays on behalf of *Bnei Yisrael*.]

And Hashem said: "I shall pardon, as you have asked. Nevertheless ... none of the men who have seen My Presence and the signs that I have performed in Egypt and in the wilderness, and who have tried Me these many times and have disobeyed Me shall see the land that I promised on oath to their fathers; none of those who spurn Me shall see it. But My servant Calev, because he was imbued with a different spirit and remained loyal to Me "I will bring into the land..." ([Bamidbar 14:11-12](#), 20-24)

This is followed immediately by an additional decree that does not seem to add anything of substance.

Hashem spoke further to Moshe and Aharon: "How much longer shall that wicked congregation keep inciting against Me? Very well, I have heeded the incessant complaints of Yisrael which they have instigated against Me. Say unto them: As I live, says Hashem, I will do just as you have urged Me. In this very wilderness shall your carcasses drop. Of all of you who were recorded in your various lists from the age of twenty years up, you who have complained against Me, not one shall enter the land in which I swore to settle you "save Calev ben Yefuneh and Yehoshua bin Nun." ([Bamidbar 14:26-30](#))

Why was this repetition necessary? Did the first account lack the required clarity?

Let us focus on certain distinctions between these two versions. The first account refers to a religious crisis. It uses the term "*yena'atzuni*," which indicates blasphemy, and it laments the people's lack of faith despite the fact that they personally had witnessed divine miracles. The second account, on the other hand, attacks the people's "*telunot*" (complaints), but makes no reference to a crisis of faith.

In the second version, the decree is an expression of poetic justice. God will bring upon the people what they, in fact, brought upon themselves by claiming that they would perish in the wilderness. According to the first rendition, however, the tone is punitive. Initially, the blasphemers are faced with immediate annihilation. Following Moshe's passionate petition, the sentence is modified, and all those who witnessed the miracles in Egypt, but nevertheless lacked faith, are barred from entering the Promised Land.

It is also noteworthy that the only exception to the first decree is Calev. Yehoshua is included in the exemption only according to the second version.

III. □ *Efes* □ □ **It is Impossible!**

The commentators suggest various solutions regarding this redundancy. However, based on the above, it would seem that the separate decrees relate to independent aspects of the sin. On the one hand, the entire episode reflects a lack of religious faith. The apostasy reaches a climax when the spies return and proclaim:

"We came to the land you sent us to; it does indeed flow with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. However, the people who inhabit the country are powerful, and the cities are fortified in the Negev region; Hittites, Yevusites, and Amorites inhabit the hill country; and Canannites dwell by the sea and along the Jordan." ([Bamidbar 13:27-28](#))

According to the spies, the children of Israel cannot conquer Canaan due to the might of the inhabitants. Although they are being subtle, their intent is revealed in one word □ □ *Efes* □ (however) □ which suggests impossibility (see Ramban). Only Calev catches the significance of this remark and responds swiftly to the challenge.

Calev hushed the people before Moshe and said, □ "Let us by all means go up, and we shall gain possession of it, for we shall surely overcome it." ([Bamidbar 13:30](#))

However, the spies immediately cut him off.

But the men who had gone up with him said, □ "We cannot attack that people, for it is stronger than we." ([Bamidbar 13:30](#))

This exchange revolves around the basic theological issue of faith in an omnipotent God. The spies' blasphemous argument finds a receptive audience and is countered only by Calev. Although Yehoshua neither joined with the spies nor identified with their argument, he nonetheless hesitated and failed to join Calev.

The first version of the decree attacks the theological aspect of the sin of the spies. It laments the blasphemy and threatens immediate punishment for the transgressors. This decree is modified due to Moshe's intervention, and the sentence is delayed, but it will be carried out nonetheless on those who lacked faith despite all the miracles that they had witnessed in Egypt. At this point, the Torah only exempts Calev explicitly as a way of highlighting his swift response.

IV. Not Quite Ready

A careful reading of the *parasha* reveals an additional issue that is not purely theological. Following this initial expression of apostasy, the children of Israel begin to cry and complain.

The whole community broke into loud cries, and the people wept that night. All Yisrael railed against Moshe and Aharon. "If only we had died in the land of Egypt, or the whole community shouted at them, or if only we might die in this wilderness! Why is Hashem taking us to that land to fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be carried off! It would be better for us to go back to Egypt!" And they said to one another, "Let us appoint a leader and head back for Egypt." ([Bamidbar 14:1-4](#))

This reaction is not unique to the sin of the spies; it is characteristic of Yisrael's behavior from the time they were taken out of Egypt. However, we find that the volume of the complaint reaches new levels, as the people hysterically break into tears and reach the mutinous conclusion to overthrow Moshe and return to Egypt. At this point, Yehoshua joins forces with Calev in an attempt at calming down the hysterical nation — but to no avail.

The second decree makes explicit reference to the people's complaints, but totally ignores the theological aspect. Not lack of faith, but a character flaw typical of the first generation results in the need to wait for a new generation to take over in order to successfully complete the journey. Members of the first generation, who were raised as slaves, lack the self-assurance and resolve necessary to enter *Eretz Yisrael*.

From this perspective, we can trace the disastrous events of the spies all the way back to the Exodus. God realized that *Bnei Yisrael* were not ready to face battle, and led them on a circuitous route in order to avoid what in retrospect accurately describes the episode of the spies.

Now when Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although it was nearer; for God said: The people may have a change of heart when they see war, and return to Egypt. ([Bamidbar 13:17](#))

Ibn Ezra questions why the Jewish People were so afraid of the Egyptian army, despite their own numerical superiority. He perceptively explains:

For the Egyptians were Yisrael's masters, and the generation that left Egypt had learned from childhood to suffer the burden of Egypt; their spirit was lowly, and how could they now fight against their masters? [Furthermore,] Yisrael were weak and untrained in warfare; behold how a small band of Amalekites came and, were it not for Moshe's prayer, they would have weakened Yisrael. (Commentary to [Shemot 14:13](#))

He continues with the intriguing claim that this character flaw, not the sin of the spies, was the real reason that the first generation had to be succeeded by a new generation before entering *Eretz Yisrael*:

And Hashem alone □ who charts the course of history, brought about the death of the males who had left Egypt, for they had not the strength to battle the Canaanites. And there arose another generation, the generation of the wilderness, which had never experienced exile and were of high spirit...

From all this we see that there is another aspect to God's decree in the wake of the spies episode, an aspect which is not rooted in the theological plane and is not necessarily to be viewed in terms of crime and punishment. Yisrael at this stage of development, recently freed from bondage, are simply not ripe to enter the Land of Israel. (This will be discussed in greater detail in the *shiur* on *Parashat Chukat*) Their immaturity is reflected by their strong emotional need to send spies before continuing on their journey, and their total loss of composure upon hearing the spies' report. It would take another forty years for them to be succeeded by a new generation □ a generation raised as free men and driven by a passionate desire to fulfill their role in the continuing saga of Jewish destiny.