

# *Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality*

## From Rav Binny Freedman

### (Portion of Shelach)

*Many years ago, an elderly man approached me following a lecture on the topic of Emunat Chachamim (the faith we are meant to have in our sages).*

*'Do you know why I am no longer religious?' he asked.*

*'It's because when I asked the greatest Rabbi in our town whether I should avail myself of an opportunity to leave Poland and join the pioneers settling the land of Israel in 1935, I was told to stay in Poland because the Torah centers of the Jewish world were in Europe, and Jews who left for Palestine would die a spiritual death.'*

*Puzzled, I naively asked him: 'but you survived; how did you get out?'*

*Upon which he explained that listening to the sage advice of his Rabbis he stayed in Poland, ended up in the camps and lost most of his family. But a friend of his who never asked the Rabbis made it to America in the early thirties and eventually got most of his family out....*

*My response to him, which some might consider blasphemous was simply: even Moshe did not know everything; one of the painful lessons of the Holocaust was that even the greatest Rabbis make mistakes. That does not diminish the fact that they were great Rabbis, it simply means they were human, and it calls into the question whether they were great leaders, even if they were great Rabbis.*

This week's portion, ***Shelach***, which includes the painful story of the terrible mistake of the spies, is an obvious example of this idea.

We have written previously of what exactly the mistake of the spies was all about; the Lubavitcher Rebbe (Rav Menchem Mendel Schneerson) suggests that they were in such a holy environment in the desert they were afraid to leave, for fear of the spiritual impact conquering the land would have on the people.

But there is an interesting side note to this question that bears thought. For whatever the reason, ten of the twelve Tribal leaders representing the leadership of the Jewish people felt it was a mistake to enter the land of Israel, suggesting that the land was not a good land (*Bamidbar* (Numbers) 13:32), that its inhabitants were too strong and that the Jewish people would not be able to conquer it. And they succeeded in convincing the Jewish people of exactly that: the people murmured and cried in their tents and were unwilling to enter the land, even suggesting it would be better to return to Egypt (*ibid.* 14:1-4).

As a result, G-d wants to destroy the Jewish people until Moshe intervenes and succeeds in gaining forgiveness for them. Indeed, the Torah tells us (*ibid.* 14:20) that Hashem (G-d) forgives the Jewish people as Moshe had asked.

And yet, that is not entirely true. G-d obviously does not destroy the Jewish people, but that generation is nonetheless doomed to die in the desert (*ibid.* 14:32-34) and they will ultimately wander in the desert for

forty years specifically, as the verse makes quite clear, as a result of the forty days the spies toured the land. So what does the Torah mean when it suggests that Hashem does indeed forgive the Jewish people?

In truth, a careful perusal of the story reveals that the sin of the spies was not one simple mistake, but rather a combination of two different issues. One issue was the fact that the Jewish people did not trust sufficiently in Hashem to enter the land on faith alone. But there was a second issue, alluded to by the language of the verse (ibid. 13:32): that they slandered the land. In fact, **Rashi** points out (13:2) that the story of the spies immediately follows the story of Miriam's maligning of her brother Moshe precisely because they did not learn the lesson implying that at the root of the problem here was that they slandered the land of Israel.

But can one slander a land? Maimonides in his *Hilchot Deot* (7:6) goes so far as saying that the decree on the generation of the desert (i.e. that they were doomed to wander and die in the desert) was only sealed because of their slander of the land. But why was *that* the significant transgression here? It seems the Jewish people were forgiven their distrust of Hashem, but were not forgiven their distrust of the land, which does not seem to make a lot of sense.

Unless we stop to consider what is really going on here. Most people think that the central issue when we slander someone is the impact such evil speech has on the object of such derision. But no less significant is the impact it has on the slanderer him or herself. Indeed, when Miriam (at the end of last week's portion) speaks ill of her brother Moshe (albeit with good intentions), who was really affected?

Moshe was a great leader before he was maligned and remained so after the event, especially as no less than G-d came to his defense. The real impact was on Miriam (who actually was consequently afflicted with *Tzaraat*; similar to leprosy) which makes this point abundantly clear. And why does Hashem come to Moshe's defense? Actually it is not for Moshe; it is because of the impact such slander would have on the Jewish people's *perception* of Moshe.

Indeed, G-d is not affected by what we believe or think, so the fact that the Jewish people lack faith in G-d is not an undermining of G-d and can be easily rectified and forgiven.

But when the spies malign the land of Israel, then the Jewish people's *perception* of the land of Israel changes and that is much harder to fix. And a nation with that kind of baggage regarding their mission cannot be the ones to undertake it and thus can never enter the land.

Indeed, Maimonides points out (Deot 7: 3) that there are three parties to slander:

The slanderer, the object of the slander, and those who hear the slander. And fascinatingly, the Rambam (Maimonides) suggests that slander 'kills' all three, but the listener most of all, perhaps because his viewpoint has been changed forever, and it cannot be fixed.

Indeed, the Jewish people's past episode of the spies can never fully regain a positive image of the land Israel, such that their ability to enter and conquer the land properly is now forever changed resulting in the fact that they can no longer be the ones to enter the land. Entering the land of Israel will now have to wait for the next generation. They are indeed forgiven for the sin of the spies, but there is still an inevitable consequence that cannot be undone.

All of which leaves us with two things to think of:

More than a century ago, a significant portion of the Jewish people invested a significant amount of effort maligning not only the (albeit often less committed to and sometimes even antagonistic towards Judaism) Zionists, but even the land of Israel they loved. And in so doing, changed the perception of a generation of Jews and sealed their fate. And while it goes without saying that the Rabbinic leaders of European Jewry were obviously not responsible for the Holocaust, they did make the same mistake many others made in not seeing that it was coming.

And less critical than whether the great Rabbis of Europe (literally: the *gedolei hador* (greats of the generation) in the nineteen twenties and early thirties were mistaken in not urging the Jewish people to enter the land, stands the question of whether they are erring in not doing so today.

After two thousand years we have come home and while we have a long way to go, we have certainly been blessed by Hashem to have taken the first major steps in the process of redemption. The largest Jewish community on the world is now in Israel. There is more Torah being studied in more yeshivot in Israel than at any time in Jewish history since the destruction of the temple two thousand years ago, not to mention the fact that we have a Jewish army in an independent State which is baruch Hashem, an economic powerhouse.

So why aren't more of the *Gedolei haDor* of today advocating to their constituencies that it is time to come home? Never mind the mistake of the spies three thousand years ago, why is the Jewish leadership of the Diaspora and particularly the Rabbinic leadership not telling their students and congregants that it is time to come home? Where is the push for a mass Aliyah *of choice*? What will our great grandchildren say regarding *our* generation, when they discuss this question seventy-five years from now??

Here is a chilling thought: The *Zohar* ( III: 158:1) suggests that the Princes of the tribes were actually hesitant to encourage the Jews to enter the land fearing that once the people were in Israel Moshe would appoint new leaders. In other words (perhaps subconsciously?) they were concerned for their positions.

Indeed, Rav Teichtal in his landmark *Eim Habanim Smeicha* (Written during the Holocaust and published in 1943 by the great Munkatscher rebbe it roundly castigates the Orthodox (Chareidi) Rabbinic leadership of the time and particularly Agudat Yisrael for not supporting Zionism and for not settling the land of Israel. It was clear to the Munkatscher that they had all made a terrible mistake in the years prior to the war...) says quite clearly (pg. 38) that "... there are many Rabbis ... in our time, this one with his court and that one with his followers and good livelihood, and if they leave for the land of Israel will obviously weaken their position ..."

While it is not for us living here in Israel to judge individuals, communities, or their leaders overseas, it is certainly a question every Jewish leader, if not every Jew living in the diaspora must at least struggle with, and this Shabbat would be a good time to start....

Wishing all a Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

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