

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Shelach)

I remember one of the guys I was in Yeshiva with, trying to convince me not to sign up for Officer's course. I would be forced to spend an additional year and a half in the army, without any spiritual environment to safeguard my religious ideals. "Atah titkalkel", he said, 'you will be corrupted'

This issue, here in Israel, threatens to rip apart the social fabric of the country. There are many in the 'religious' camp (whatever that means...) who believe that those capable of sitting and learning Torah should not go into the army.

After all, for two thousand years of exile we did not have a land, our only connection to our Jewish heritage was the study of our Torah, which allowed us to maintain our identity and survive as a people. And make no mistake about it, I watched a lot of guys go into the army with a Kippah on their heads and a pair of tefillin in their bags and gradually lose their connection to Jewish ritual and Jewish tradition. Hard as it is for some to imagine, it is very easy to lose your Jewish identity in the 'field', even in the only Jewish army in the world....

I remember one weekend of R & R in Netanya, when we were down from Lebanon (after one of the most intense and stressful months I had ever experienced). Shabbat afternoon we were free and were told we would have the evening off as well. So all the guys cleared out to go to the beach, and head into town. For me, though, it was Shabbat, so I stayed behind in Beit Goldmintz, the R&R center we were bivouacked in for the week. There was one other boy who was from a religious home, who was clearly torn about what to do. Later, when everyone had gone, I realized I was alone; I never asked him what he had decided or where he had gone.... The army really does wear you down.

And so, I understand the position of those Jews who are opposed to yeshiva students doing the army.

This week's story, however, is the Torah's response to this position. You can only disagree with someone when you first understand and even respect where they are coming from. So, having considered that point of view, I respectfully disagree.

This week's portion, *Shelach*, contains one of the most challenging stories in the entire Torah: the story of the spies.

"Sh'lach Lecha' Anashim Ve'Yaturu ..." *"Send out spies for yourselves..."* (Numbers 13:1)

In an incredible moment in Jewish history, the Jewish people are ready to achieve their mission. With the fleshpots and pyramids of Egypt behind them, having come through the Red Sea and having received the Torah at Sinai, the Jewish people, on the banks of the Jordan River, are now ready to come home. More than two hundred years after the children of Joseph and his brothers became enslaved in Egypt, the centuries old dream of the Jewish people is finally about to be realized. G-d has told them they are now ready to enter the land. In fact, the same verse that contains the mission to spy out the land, contains as well, the promise that G-d will give it to them.

So one wonders, if G-d is already promising to give them the land, why is there any need at all to send out spies? Perhaps this is where things begin to go off course: If the Jewish people truly believed in G-d, they would certainly have no need of spies.

Indeed, as soon as the spies return, the journey that began with such promise ends in disaster.

Hearing their report, the people sense that the spies, men of great stature, doubt whether they can conquer the land, and this apparent lack of faith results in an entire generation losing the opportunity to enter the land of Israel, dying off instead in the desert, until the next generation, born free of the slave mentality of Egyptian bondage can finally come home at last....

Yet the idea of sending out the spies here seems to emanate from G-d, as the verse says: *“Send out spies for yourselves”*.

38 years later, in repeating this story to the second generation about to finally enter the land, Moshe clarifies what the story was really about:

“Va’Tikrevun Elai’ Kulchem, Va’Tomru’ Nishle’chah Anashium Lefaneinu, Ve’yachperu lanu Et Ha’Aretz...”

“And you all approached me, and said: let us send out men to explore the land for us...” (Deuteronomy 1:22)

Tradition thus suggests that the idea originated with the Jewish people and may well have represented a lack of faith on their part, however, G-d, seeing this was what the people wanted, acquiesced to their demand and ordered Moshe to allow them to send the spies.

However, the principle of sending scouts ahead to spy out territory prior to conquest is not necessarily a bad thing.

In fact, Moshe himself, before conquering *Ya’azer*, sends out spies (Bamidbar 21:3), and so does Yehoshua (Joshua), (see Joshua 21:32), relying heavily on the information his two spies bring back before beginning the conquest of the land.

And the Torah makes the point of suggesting that the mistake the people made occurs only upon the return and report of the spies:

“Ve’Lo Avitem La’a lot, Va’Tamru Et Pi’ Hashem Elokeichem, Va’Teragnu’ Be’Ohaleichem...”

“And you did not want to go up (to the land of Israel), and you rebelled against the word of G-d, and murmured in your tents...” (Deuteronomy 1: 26-27)

All of which leaves us with a number of puzzling questions:

How could the people doubt G-d’s ability to bring them into the land of Israel?

And while it is true that once the Jewish people entered the land of Israel, the overt miracles of the desert, including the manna from heaven and miraculous clouds of glory that accompanied them up to that point, ceased, and the Jews now had to fight and fend for themselves, this does not explain the problem of the

people here. For one thing, G-d clearly tells them they will succeed in conquering the land, and for another, they have already had a taste of their ability to fight and be victorious against a strong enemy in the battle against Amalek, where Joshua and the elite of the army have to fight an all-day battle to repel the enemy.

And where is Moshe, and for that matter Aaron, in this entire story? Why are they not able to convey to the people that there is no need to doubt G-d's ability to lead them into the land of Israel?

"Va'yipol Moshe Ve'Aaron Al Peneihem..."!

"And Moshe and Aaron fall to the ground", literally "on their faces"! Are they simply overwhelmed by the events unfolding around them, unable to think of anything to say?

Even more troubling is the reaction of Calev. If ever there was a moment of pure potential it is in the speech of Calev:

"Va'Yahas Calev Et Ha'Am El Moshe, Va'Yomer Aloh Na'aleh Ve'Yarashnu' Otah, Ki Yachol Nuchal Lah"

And Calev silenced the people towards Moshe, and said: 'We can surely go up (to the land) and inherit it because we just CAN...' (Bamidbar 13: 30)

Imagine the scene: The entire Jewish people are encamped in the desert, ready to finally enter the land of Israel. Upon hearing the report of the spies, they are apparently terrified.

'How can we do this?'

'The people are giants, the land is filled with fortified cities and armies of trained warriors; how can we, barely a year out of slavery in Egypt, hope to conquer this entire country?'

So Calev, perhaps seeing that Moshe and Aaron have nothing to say, jumps up on a rock, as it were, and shouts (poetic license here) **'Enough!!'** and everyone is shocked into silence! You could probably hear a pin drop, even on the sand, and Calev has a moment, an incredible opportunity, to say the right thing, to bring the people back to their senses and save the day. What would *you* have said at that moment?

There seems to be a glaring omission in Calev's brief speech: why does he not mention all of the great miracles G-d has performed? Why not shout out loud: 'what of the splitting of the sea? The vanquishing of Egypt? How can you all be so short sighted?' Yet Calev does not even mention these things, simply saying 'come on, people, we can do it! We can go up and conquer the land!'

Well, it is no wonder the people paid little attention to this short and obviously ineffectual speech. And of course, the moment is lost.... How could Calev, and for that matter, Moshe, miss this obvious response to the people's concerns?

What a loss that moment represents. What a different world we might be in if only Calev had found the words....

One is reminded of the vain attempts by Vladimir Jabotinsky in the period preceding the Holocaust to convince the Jewish communities of Germany and Poland that it was time to go home, to the land of

Israel. Although he, like Calev, saw the writing on the wall, he was not able to seize the moment and sway people's opinions. Alas, if only the words had been there. But in Calev's case, it seems, they were. Why did he not mention the obvious?

Lastly, consider who the spies really were: they were the princes of the tribes, men of great stature, chosen as the leaders of the people, "*Roshei B'nei Yisrael Hemah*": "*They were the great men of Israel*". (Numbers 13:3)

It is difficult to imagine therefore, how such men could suddenly, in the midst of an experience where G-d was everywhere, and where miracles were a daily event, doubt G-d?

Obviously, there is something else at the root of this painful episode.

The **Lubavitcher Rebbe**, of blessed memory, in his *Likutei Sichot*, suggests an idea, which may respond to all of our questions. Perhaps the reason Calev does not mention the great miracles Hashem had performed was because these same miracles were the root of the problem.

The people understood that part of the process of entering the land of Israel, was that G-d would necessarily withdraw. In the desert, Hashem was everywhere, providing manna from heaven, water from the magical well of Miriam, even protection from the elements by way of the clouds of glory. And that is clearly not the goal in Judaism; because when G-d is everywhere then where are we? Much like parents, who need to get out of the way so their children can grow, entering the land of Israel represented that period in the growth of the Jewish people where they would come into their own.

The people understood that it was for this new reality that they were being readied. The problem was, how do you leave the world where G-d is everywhere, to the world where He is so hidden? The spies weren't afraid of a physical defeat, they were afraid of a spiritual defeat. What happens to a people accustomed to meditating on G-d twenty-four hours a day, when they have to actually serve in the army, work in the fields, and earn a living? It is no big deal to have a deep spiritual relationship with G-d, in the Yeshiva that was the desert; but can you maintain that level in the office, or on the tractor?

This was, you see, precisely the mistake of the spies in the desert three thousand years ago. 'How can we leave the perfect spiritual environment of the desert, for life in the trenches and the fields?'

'How will we be able to maintain our level of Torah when we need to harvest the crops, and man the guard posts?'

'We are not ready', the princes of the tribes must have felt; little more than a year out of Egyptian servitude, the Jews are still complaining and doubting G-d; they need more time in "Yeshiva", as it were.

'When we get to Israel, there will be no time to learn all day; we need to spend more time in the presence of G-d, in order to be on the spiritual level that will allow us to survive out there in the harsh reality of the world.'

Israel will be an "*Eretz Ochelet Yoshveha*", "*A land that consumes its inhabitants*", say the spies (13:32), which means us - The people will be consumed by their physical pursuits; who will have time to study Torah after a long hard day working in the fields?

That is why the miracles were not mentioned by Calev; they weren't the *answer* to the claim of the spies, they were the *reason* the spies felt they should not yet go in! And that is why Moshe and Aaron have nothing to say; because the entire contention of the spies is how can we leave the world where we can hear Torah from Moshe and Aaron every day? So anything Moshe and Aaron might say would only further prove the spies' point! And this, indeed, is exactly what Calev is saying:

"... Aloh Na'aleh Ve'Yarashnu' Otah, Ki Yachol Nuchal Lah" *"... We can surely go up (to the land) and inherit it because we CAN"* (Bamidbar 13: 30)

Calev's point may well have been that even in the difficult physical pursuits of entering, conquering, and working the land; we can continue to 'go up'. We can grow spiritually in the world outside the Yeshiva....

The spies you see, were wrong, because the purpose of a life lived in Torah is not elevation of the soul; that is only a vehicle to sanctify the world. The real goal is to find G-d in the world, not to see Him by leaving the world behind.

The perspective of the yeshiva student afraid to enter the challenges of the army, itself a mitzvah, in defense of the Jewish people, limits G-d to the domain of the spiritual environment. But Judaism suggests that Hashem is everywhere, and we can find G-d and a relationship with Him, even in the most physical of experiences.

One wonders (though it is certainly not for us to judge...), whether this was the tragic mistake of the leaders of our generation, indeed the princes of Torah and great leaders of the Yeshiva world some eighty years ago, who almost en masse, resisted the opportunity to leave the spiritual desert (even paradise) of the Yeshivot in Europe, for fear of the spiritual corruption life in the barren desert of the land of Israel would have entailed.

Imagine what a different Jewish world we would live in today, if the state of Israel had been built by the yeshiva students of the Mir and Belz, Volozhin and Radin....

May Hashem bless us all to experience both the desert and the land, soon, in the Land we all dream of, the land we call home.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

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