

A Weekly Byte... from Isralight

(Portion of Sh'lach)

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality
From Rav Binny

A black and white image of a Jew being beaten in the streets of Vienna; Jews being forced onto trains and deported, and a column of Jews with faces full of despair, being forced out of town, herded down a dark street led by Rabbis holding Torah scrolls... Scenes straight out of the Holocaust; except they aren't.

These are actually scenes from a silent movie produced in 1924 in Austria, nearly fifteen years before Hitler's Nazi Stormtroopers came marching across the border when Austria was annexed to Germany in what became known as the Anschluss, in March of 1938.

The film was based on a book written and published in 1922 by Hugo Bettauer, a Jewish writer, who, somehow, saw what was coming. The book was a huge success and sold a quarter of a million copies. And it shined a light on the overt storm of anti-Semitism that was rapidly spreading across Austria and all of Europe. Two years later Bettauer was assassinated by a Nazi sympathizer, who perhaps did not want the world to see the truth just yet....

The film, shown across Europe as part of the eightieth anniversary of the Nazi Anschluss of Austria, is chillingly accurate, and one wonders how Bettauer saw or at least intuited, what was coming, when so many around him missed all the signs that with hindsight, were so painfully obvious?

This week, we read the portion of *Shlach*, which tells the story of the twelve spies sent by Moshe to spy out the land, and the subsequent debacle of their report which ultimately resulted in the Jews wallowing in the desert for near forty years

Interestingly, as Rav Yoel Bin-Nun points out, the word **meraglim** which means spies, does not appear in the entire portion of *Shlach* (only appearing later in *Devarim* (Deuteronomy) in Moshe's re-telling of the story...).

The word used here, rather, is **la'tur** (*Bamidbar* 13:2) which is better translated as to scout out, rather than to spy. Indeed, in the entire portion the word *tur* is used rather than *rigul* (spying). They were meant to scout it out; literally (ibid. 13:18) they were meant to go and **see** it, which indeed they did.

Of course, this raises the obvious question: if they basically did what they were asked to do, why were the consequences so severe? What did they do wrong?

Rav Amnon Bazak points out a fascinating detail: when the spies return and offer their report, the verb **re'iyah** (seeing) is only actually applied to the things that they described as being negative. They **saw** a land that was filled with giants (ibid. 13:28, 32-33) which consumed its inhabitants...

They also saw a "land of milk and honey" (ibid. v. 27) but the Torah does not describe that they saw it; they just share that it was so. Perhaps, suggest Rav Bazak, this is an allusion to their tragic mistake: it was not about **what** they went to see, it was **how** they chose to see it. For whatever the reason they chose to see the land of Israel in a negative light. And of course, how we choose to see life is the life we actually live. Thus, they go so far as to suggest (ibid. v. 33) that they felt like grasshoppers before these giants, and thus they were. ***If you think you are a grasshopper, then you are.***

But the tragedy does not end there. There is a second episode which occurs in the aftermath of Hashem's decree that the Jewish people were doomed, as a result of the sin of the spies, to wander in the desert for nigh-on forty years until that entire generation died in the wilderness (ibid 14:28-29).

There was a group (ibid. 14:39-45) who realized the tragic error that had just been made and determined to rise up and conquer the land as G-d had originally intended.

But Moshe entreats them not to go, as Hashem had already decreed this generation was no longer meant to enter the land. *"It will not succeed"* he warns them (ibid. v. 41). But they were stubborn (The **Seforno**'s explanation of the verb used for their action *"va'ya'apilu"* (ibid v. 44); hence they became known as the *Ma'apilim*, the stubborn ones...) and refused to listen. And tragically, as Moshe warned, they were cut down and massacred by the war-like Canaanite and Amalekite Tribes living in the desert, for G-d was not with them.

And one wonders again, what did they do wrong? They actually seem to have epitomized the Jewish value of *teshuva* (repentance): to recognize a mistake has been made, to regret it, and to be determined to change the future. They wanted to make it right and go to Israel, so what was their mistake?

A friend of mine recently shared with me the story of a fellow who had just been blessed with his first child, a boy. And he was anxious to fulfill the mitzvah of circumcising his newborn son giving him a Brit Milah on the eighth day as proscribed. The baby, however, was jaundiced and yellow and the Doctor would not give the OK medically to perform the bris due to health risks. But the new father, a religious fellow who very much wanted his son to be circumcised immediately on the eighth day, was having a tough time accepting this and was exhorting the Dr. to take another look at the baby or just sign the medical form allowing the circumcision. Until a Rav (Rabbi) standing nearby suggested to him: 'You are like the ma'apilim! You want to do the mitzvah, but it's not the right time!'

Rav **Tzadok HaKohen**, in his **Tzidkat HaTzaddik**, points out that the verse suggests (ibid. 13:41) that it will not succeed, **then**. But there will come a different time, when the same audacity and determination (even stubbornness) to rise up, even against the will of the Jewish leadership of the day, and retake the land of Israel, will indeed succeed. And Rav Tzadok, writing in Lublin at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, amidst the growing fire of Zionism, suggests (paragraph 46) "This is now that time".

Interestingly, many great Rabbis of the day even leading up to the terrible events of the Holocaust, remained firm in their belief that the Jews should not follow the Zionists back to Israel.

'We are in the exile as part of Hashem (G-d)'s decree and it is not for us to stubbornly presume to retake the land of Israel', suggests the Satmar Rebbe (Rav Yoel Teitelbaum) in his **Va'Yoel Moshe**.

Indeed, there was a famous adage attributed to the Munkatcher Rebbe (the **Minchas Elazar**) who quoted the verse regarding the *Tzitzit* (Fringes) which appears at the end of our portion:

"Velo' tuturu Acharei levavchem ve'acharei Eineichem"

"Do not stray after your hearts and eyes" (ibid. 15:39)

'This means, suggested the Munkatcher Rebbe:

"Don't stray after your hearts: this is Herzl (herz' means heart in Yiddish) **nor after your eyes : this is Kook.** (Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook whose vision (i.e. the 'eyes') was inspiring the Zionist movement..."

Years after the Munkatcher passed away as the storm of the Holocaust was reaching Hungary, tens of thousands of his Chassidim in Munkatch would not listen to the Zionist who believed it was time to get out and get to Israel, simply because the Munkatcher had said they should not go....

But Rav Tzadok seems to have been in disagreement. He quotes the Talmud (Tractate *Sotah* 49b):

“Be’ikvesa de’meshicha, chutzpah yasga”

‘In the days preceding redemption, chutzpah (audacity or insolence) will dominate.’

In other words, there will come a time when the Jews will finally muster up the chutzpah, the audacity, to ignore their teachers, recognizing that it is time to come home.

Incredibly, if understood in this way, it also means much of the leadership, tragically, will not recognize yet that the time for such audacity has arrived; they will not realize the times have changed and will miss the opportunity...

Three thousand years ago the *ma’apilim* did not realize the time had passed and the opportunity had already been lost for that generation.

And eighty years ago, an entire generation, most Rabbis included, did not realize that the time had come, and the opportunity to avoid the greatest tragedy in Jewish history was also lost for that generation. Which makes one wonder, what time is it now, today?

Usually when an opportunity presents itself, it is the small minority, like Hugo Bettauer, who actually see the signs and recognize what is coming; most, however, miss it completely until it is too late. Are we living in such a time? This idea is true on so many levels: imagine if you had recognized Steve Jobs brilliance when he was first developing his ‘portable phone’ or his portable computer, and invested in Apple when it was just getting started....

And sometimes one meets people who look back at the life they feel they never lived because they missed such opportunities; the girl they never had the courage to ask out, or the kind word that could have changed everything and avoided years of anger and lost relationships.

But even more critically, it is true on a National level. Eighty years after the Nuremberg laws were passed, and a hundred and forty some years after mobs chased Jews in the streets of France while Alfred Dreyfus was put on trial and Theodore Herzl observed, once again, Jews no longer feel safe in Europe, and Synagogues and cemeteries are targets in America.

But unlike 1935, this time, we have a place to go; maybe it’s time to start seriously thinking about coming home to the largest Jewish community in the world? Maybe the time of Satmar and Munkatch has passed, and it’s time to take a closer look at the words of the Tzidkat Hatzaddik?

Maybe, like Hugo Bettauer, we would do well to pay a little closer attention?

Shabbat Shalom, from Israel, (The land of milk and honey)

Binny Freedman