

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Sh'lach)

Perhaps one of the most important aspects of training to be a Rabbi and a teacher is to have spent time in the presence of great Torah scholars; it allows you to appreciate how little you really know.

Having had the privilege of pursuing rabbinical studies in a place where geniuses 'grew on trees' and where classes were given by some of the greatest Torah scholars of the generation, the prospect of 'graduating' as a rabbi became somewhat of a daunting prospect. How does one reach the point where they feel ready to assume rabbinical studies? Especially after being exposed on a daily basis to what a Torah-scholar and a rabbi can be?

I recall a friend very close to me who was, confronted with this very challenge: How do you know when you are ready to leave the greenhouse of the Yeshiva world and put the knowledge you have accrued to serve the community? Torah, after all, is an endless pursuit; do you ever arrive at a point where you feel you have learned enough to begin to teach? And yet, if you wait until you feel you are ready, you might enter the field at the age of ninety!

Struggling with this question and trying to decide whether to stay on longer and learn, or go out into the Jewish community to begin teaching, he finally approached Rav Yehuda Amital, the head of the Yeshiva and one of today's great Torah scholars.

Rav Amital, sitting in the study hall poring over his books, leaned back in his chair to consider the question, then, with a smile, simply said two words:

"Atah Tzodek". "You are absolutely right."

The student, not quite understanding, must have had a puzzled expression on his face, so Rav Amital put his hand on the boy's arm, and again, this time with a smile, repeated: "Atah Tzodek". "You are absolutely right."

I have always wondered exactly what Rav Amital meant. Perhaps his point was that you are never really ready, but as long as you know that, and remember it always, then you are ready....

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 the promise as well that G-d will give it to them.

“Sh’lach Lecha’ Anashim Ve’Yaturu Et Eretz Canaan, Asher Ani Noten Le’Be’nei Yisrael...”
“Send out spies for yourselves, that they may spy out the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the children of Israel ...” (13:1)

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: “Sh’lach Lecha’ Anashim” “Send out spies for yourselves”.

In truth, 38 years later, when 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.

Of course, this raises the obvious question: how can the people be held responsible for the mistakes that resulted from sending the spies when G-d allowed them to do it?

This in and of itself is an important lesson: As the Midrash suggests:

“Molichin Et Ha’Adam Le’an She’rotzeh Leileich”
“A person is led in the direction he wishes to go.”

If you want to do something that is mistaken, don’t blame G-d for allowing you to do it. How often do we say to ourselves: ‘If G-d didn’t want me to eat cheeseburgers, he wouldn’t have made me so hungry just as I was passing MacDonald’s...!’ or the like.

Ultimately, our mistakes begin with our desires, and it is up to us to decide what we really want in this world. So if the Jewish people really *wanted* to send out spies, implying a lack of faith on their part, the fact that G-d acquiesced does not relieve them of assuming responsibility for the consequences of that mistake.

However, this still does not arrive at the root of the problem, as 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 even if the issue is not the actual decision or even request to send spies, but rather the motivation behind it, the Torah does not make that clear at all, implying the real issue though already in the air once the spies are sent, is only realized upon their return. Indeed Moshe himself readily admits in re-telling the story (Deuteronomy 1:23) that:

“Va’Yitav Be’Enai HaDavar”

“The idea (of sending spies) seemed a good one in my eyes...”

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:

First off, how could the people doubt G-d’s ability to bring them into the land of Israel? The same people that actually witnessed the Ten Plagues, and the splitting of the Sea which saw the entire Egyptian army vanquished and the very same nations of Canaan terrified, (See the song of the sea in Exodus 15: 14-16: *“...Then all the nations of Canaan were filled with trembling...”*. Clearly the Jews knew the Canaanites were terrified...) were doubtful as to G-d’s ability to conquer the land?

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.

Obviously, there is something else going on here, and a closer look at the text of our story reveals even more challenging questions.

The most glaring challenge to the afore-mentioned theories associating the sin here with the report the spies bring back is clearly dispelled when reviewing what they actually said.

It is the spies who actually coin the phrase *“A land of milk and honey”* (Numbers 13: 27)! Much of their report is actually quite positive. And even the second half of their message, containing many challenges regarding the impending battle to conquer the land, is certainly within their purview as spies. The goal of spying out the land, clearly delineated by Moshe in charging them with their mission, is to give a complete report on what they see, which they do. No one would expect spies to come back and paint a rose-colored picture of the challenges they have seen. The people need to know what to expect.

And while it has been suggested by some of the commentaries that the spies’ mistake was in sharing this information with the entire people, instead of just with Moshe; it is too difficult to imagine that this mistake is what causes the entire Jewish people to remain in the desert for another thirty nine years, preventing an entire generation from being worthy of entering the land of Israel, doomed instead by the wrath of G-d to die in the desert.

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? Is Moshe, capable of arguing with G-d himself at the debacle of the Golden Calf, unable here of finding anything convincing 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?’

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? (And a closer look at Moshe’s recounting of this moment in Deuteronomy, Chapter 1 reveals this question to an even greater degree...)

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?

‘Look around you! Cannot He who split the Sea, and rains bread down from heaven every day, vanquish our enemies before us?’ Why are none of these miracles even mentioned?

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.

You see, the question was not why the people and for that matter the princes, did not believe in G-d, the question was whether they believed in G-d too much.

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.

G-d did not create us in order to do everything for us. Hashem wants us to be partners with Him in perfecting an imperfect world. Only in this manner can we become all we are meant to be and create the world as it is meant to be.

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?

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 two years in the army, without any spiritual environment to safeguard my religious ideals. "Atah titkalkel", he said, 'you will be corrupted'....

Indeed, this is one of the issues in modern Israeli society, which 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....

When you have to get up an hour early on so little sleep, when you are the only one on Shabbat not watching television and hanging with all the guys in the base's TV room, when you are up in Lebanon, and the only one who won't eat the fresh roasted lamb brought to you by the local Sheikh, or when, in officer's course, all the guys spend Saturday afternoon preparing for the grueling Sunday morning exams, and you can only begin studying when Shabbat and the Saturday night run are over at 11 PM, believe me, it wears you down.

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). Saturday afternoon (Shabbat) 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 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 miracles of the desert were simply the preparation for entering the world. Instead of being lowered to where the real world drags us down, Judaism believes we can serve to raise the entire world to where we all should be.

If being in the world is clearly the will of G-d, (witness all of the *mitzvot* one can fulfill in the army, and especially tilling the soil in the land of Israel...), then our challenge is to make that experience of the physical world a spiritual uplifting in and of itself. For in so doing, we truly become partners with G-d, by bringing G-d into the world we are both creating anew every day.

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 more than 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....

Indeed, one might argue, though we cannot be sure, that there is something very self-centered about a perspective that keeps me in the desert where I can grow spiritually. After all, as long as I am in Yeshiva, learning and growing, I am not yet contributing all that I can to the world, making it a better place to be. All of which is fine, as long as the reason I am being selfish for the moment is in order to better serve the community later on.

When students are studying to be doctors, they do not really serve patients while in medical school; they first need to learn enough to serve at all. Only later are they ready to begin to serve the community. So it is reasonable to ask the question we began with: How do I know when I am ready?

Make no mistake about it; this is not a question for the Yeshiva student alone; every Jew knows the seclusion of the desert, along with the challenge of ‘conquering the land’, and the spiritual tension that exists between them.

We begin our day with a brief retreat into the spiritual desert; an opportunity to pray and/or take some time to study Torah, before the pressures of daily life engulf us.

Early in the morning, when the kids are still asleep and the phone is quiet, one has a little time to re-experience the desert; to explore once again a closer relationship with life and living, and the source of it all...

But then we emerge into the ‘land’ with all the stirrings of doubt that of necessity come with the world of business, labor, and even the practical *mitzvot* of building a better world.

And how often do we feel that the ‘land’ is ‘consuming’ us? That even while we are still in the desert learning or praying, we cannot help but watch our minds wander off to the land and all its concerns....

Our challenge, however, is to see Hashem everywhere, and to bring that desert with us into the land every day, and everywhere we go...

One wonders whether this is at the root of world Jewry’s reluctance even now, to take that challenging step, and enter the land of Israel.

For those who pay lip service every day, even three times a day, to ‘returning home to Jerusalem’, and have been on ‘missions’ spying out the land, not once but many times, perhaps the challenge of entering the land and leaving behind a ‘desert’ where kosher food and magnificent Yeshiva day school educations are a phone-call away, is too challenging. Maybe there is much we can all learn from the mistake of the spies three thousand years ago....

So, how do we know we are ready to enter the world? Perhaps as long as the question still bothers us, we are ready. As long as we feel the tug to return to the desert, and as long as we still yearn for the spiritual heights of Sinai and the splitting of the Red Sea, we can at least bring that experience with us into the world every day.

And if the question is no longer there, maybe that is when we need to take some time, retreat a little and discover a little desert in our lives, so that we can again bring it with us back into the world....

Today, more than ever, we need as a people, to find this balance.

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,

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