

The Path To Follow

Shelach

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The Sin of the Spies and the Greatness of Joshua

It is written, “Send for yourself men, and let them spy out the land of Canaan” (Bamidbar 13:2).

The Ba'al HaTurim states that the last letters in the expression Shelach lecha anashim (“Send for yourself men”) form the term chacham (wise man), meaning that these men had to be wise and righteous. We may raise a certain number of questions in regards to the spies, questions that we shall examine one by one to see how they can be answered.

First of all, why did Moshe receive the order to send wise and righteous men in particular? Did wisdom have anything to do with their mission? Furthermore, despite being wise men, their mission was a disaster because they spoke ill of the land. In addition, how is it possible for such bad things to have occurred on account of such wise men?

We also need to examine the verse, “Let us appoint a head, and let us return to Egypt” (Bamidbar 14:4). Here Rashi cites the Sages (Mechilta D'Rabbi Yishmael) in stating that this is the language of idolatry, meaning that they wanted to return to Egypt with an idol at their head. Had they forgotten what had happened to them during the sin of the golden calf, when they were almost wiped out? Yet now they wanted to do the same thing?

Another question: How is it possible that the generation of the desert – which was a generation of knowledge (Vayikra Rabba 9:1), having witnessed the greatest revelation in history, having the clouds of glory surrounding them and the manna descending for them – could say, “For they are stronger than we” (Bamidbar 13:31), on which our Sages state: “Do not read ‘we’ but ‘He’ [i.e., Hashem]” (Sotah 35a)?

In addition, the Sages said in regards to the spies: “They were all righteous, but were misled by false reasoning. They said: ‘If Israel enters the land, we will be superseded, since it is only in the desert that we are considered to be worthy leaders.’” (Zohar III:158a). This is surprising, for did they speak ill of Eretz Israel and Hashem simply because they sought personal glory?

Furthermore, how would remaining in the desert help them to retain power? After all, nobody holds on to power forever!

To explain all this, we shall first examine certain issues. On the verse, “Send for yourself men” (Bamidbar 13:2), the Sages cite Resh Lakish as interpreting this to mean: “Of your own initiative” (Sotah 34b). We also find that G-d clearly did not want the spies to be sent (Bamidbar Rabba

16:7), for He had previously described the goodness of Eretz Israel to them (Shemot 3:8). As a result, was there any reason to doubt His words, especially since, up until that point, they were living in the desert like in the Garden of Eden? Therefore why the desire to send spies at this point in time?

At first, there was certainly reason to view the spies in a favorable light, for the Children of Israel had told Moshe: “It is true that we are experiencing miracles in the desert, but we will have to live according to natural laws when we enter the land.” Hence they wanted to send spies into the land to see how the Canaanites lived, in order to easily conquer the land and defeat its inhabitants.

As a result of the Children of Israel's request, the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moshe: “Send for yourself wise men,” and we know that a wise man is superior to a prophet (Bava Batra 12a). He wanted their wisdom and righteousness to enable them to quickly understand how to conquer the land and defeat the Canaanites by natural means, even though the Canaanites were strong and possessed fortified cities – and despite the fact this was all unnecessary, since G-d would fight for them and the conquest of the land would occur in a miraculous way. In regards to these very same men, who were righteous while in the camp, as mentioned in the Gemara (Chagigah 14) and Rashi (Bamidbar 13:3), in reality the Holy One, blessed be He, demanded that they not explore the land. Instead, as tribal heads and leaders of the Children of Israel, they should have explained to the people that there was no reason to undertake this mission, since G-d had promised them that the land was good and that the Canaanites would be easily defeated.

As a result, at the very instant Hashem asked Moshe to send wise men, it was with the intention that they should be wise enough to understand – before proceeding to explore the land – that it made no sense to go.

Instead of doing Hashem's will and finding an ingenious way of not going, these wise men – who could understand that there was no reason to explore the land – not only failed to look for such a way, but on the contrary, they found a way of doing evil when they went! All this happened because they were only looking for an excuse to go. In reality, they had no reason to go and explore the land, which was very good.

Since they were looking for an excuse, Hashem provided them with one so they could be punished measure for measure (Shabbat 105b). In fact a person is allowed to follow the path that he wishes to pursue (Makkot

10b), which is why Scripture established a relationship between the departure of the spies and their return: Just as their return was with an evil intention, likewise their departure was with an evil intention (Sotah 35a).

This is why the Torah states, “And they went and they came” (Bamidbar 13:26), which prompted Rashi to say: “This compares their going with their coming. Just as their coming was with an evil intention, so was their going with an evil intention.” Now this demands an explanation, since the spies were righteous when they departed! We can understand this, however, according to what we have said, namely that the Holy One, blessed be He, knew that since they were wise and righteous men, they should have convinced the Children of Israel that there was no need for them to explore the land. It was only when they actually departed that we can see they did so with an evil intention.

We may say that they provoked this disaster because they had just been nominated as tribal leaders, and they may have grown so proud that they did not want to give up this honorable position when the people would enter Eretz Israel. Even if we say that their intentions were possibly good, for they knew that community leaders merit an outpouring of sanctity from Heaven to lead the Children of Israel, they still committed a sin vis-à-vis G-d's will, for He said that He was making the Children of Israel leave the poverty of Egypt in order to bring them into a land of abundance.

From here we also understand how they could have said, “For they are stronger than [Hashem].” We find in tractate Sotah that whoever is filled with pride, it is as if he practiced idolatry. We mentioned that they sinned because they were filled with pride, to the point that G-d and them could not live together in this world, for pride resembles an idolatrous belief.

In regards to sending Joshua along with them, Moshe wanted someone who could reprimand the other spies if they went astray, someone who could defend the honor of Heaven and openly proclaim that Hashem's word is true and unchanging.

We find this idea alluded to in the letter yud, which Moshe added to his name and which has a numerical value (when spelled out in full) of 20. This is equal to the numerical value of the initials of eretz zavat chalav u'devash (“a land flowing with milk and honey” – Shemot 3:8).

May the Holy One, blessed be He, help us to sanctify His Name in this world and make Him loved by man in joy and peace. Amen.

The Mysteries of the Sambatyon River Part III

Summary of previous installments: A terrible decree is hovering over the Jewish community of a certain German city. The people have been told to appoint a man to confront a wicked prince in a dual of magic. This prince, a great sorcerer, has reigned terror over all the residents of the city. In a dream, one resident is told that only a man who possesses the spirit of G-d, and who knows how to conjure up the ministering angels – not by magic, but solely through holiness and purity – can confront the prince. In that case, no one will be able to do them any harm, and they will be left in peace. Yet who is this man? In a dream, it is revealed that he is from the tribes living beyond the Sambatyon River. But how can it be crossed?

This is what the man with the dream told them: “You have spoken well, my children. However you are not worthy of having the laws of nature changed for you, and those who must save you will know what to do with your emissary, who will cross the river on Shabbat.”

That said, all the residents of the city gathered in a certain place and agreed on sending the chazan Rabbi Meir Shatz, who was a righteous and pious man, extremely well-versed in Torah. He was given provisions for the journey, as well as three men to accompany him, and they took to the road with the blessing of the people. They arrived at the edge of the Sambatyon River on the eve of Shabbat, eight days before the end of the 12-month period which the emperor had given them to find a man who could confront the wicked prince.

When darkness fell, Rabbi Meir Shatz began to cross the river, which, as we have said, was calm and did not flow or throw up rocks. Some time later, he found himself on the other side of the river, in the midst of a community of people. He immediately addressed the people and said: “My dear brothers, I have a letter from your brothers the Children of Israel, who live on the other side of the river.” Even before he could finish uttering these words, the people seized him and placed him in prison for having desecrated Shabbat. Not long afterwards, however, when they finished reading his letter and understood the gravity of the decree that was hovering over their brothers the Children of Israel, they released him and asked for forgiveness.

At that point, they drew lots to determine who among them would serve as an emissary to save the Children of Israel from the threat of annihilation. The lot fell on one member of the community named Rabbi Dan, an old man who was hunched over and walked with a limp. The

leaders of the community then told Rabbi Meir Shatz that from now on, he would be obligated to live with them, no longer able to return home, lest he desecrate Shabbat again. His wife would remain as a widow for her entire life, since it was impossible to write a get on Shabbat. The same applied to the wife of Rabbi Dan and his sons, who would all remain there. The two men would each marry another wife.

Rabbi Meir Shatz quickly gave Rabbi Dan the instructions that he wanted to give him, and the latter crossed the river on Shabbat. On the other side, he found the three men who had accompanied Rabbi Meir. Upon seeing Rabbi Dan alone, the three began to tremble before the appearance of this tiny, limping Jew.

“Where’s Rabbi Meir?” they asked. Rabbi Dan briefly explained to them that Rabbi Meir was obligated to remain on the other side of the river for the rest of his life.

The three men began to whisper to one another: “How is it possible for this tiny, limping Jew to confront the powerful prince? What has Rabbi Meir done to us? We’re all lost!” Rabbi Dan, who knew what they were saying to one another, reassured them and quickly gave them instructions. In six days, they had already returned to their city.

It was the final day set by the emperor, and on that day the Jewish community multiplied their prayers and supplications. It was then that Rabbi Dan arrived, along with the men who accompanied him. They found themselves before all the people, who were stunned to see the physical appearance of Rabbi Dan, a tiny Jew who was thin and walked with a limp. How could he compete with this terrible sorcerer, the prince? They were still wondering how things could possibly go well, when the emperor ordered all the Jews to set out for a specific location in the wilderness. The other peoples and the sorcerer prince would stand before them, according to the emperor’s orders.

At the set time, the prince arrived there along with an escort. When he saw Rabbi Dan, the prince began to roar with laughter, exclaiming before the emperor: “Are the Jews making fun of me, challenging me with an old man who limps? I’ll send him flying 30 miles with my little finger!”

When the Jews heard his voice, they were seized with great fear. However the three men accompanying Rabbi Dan raised their voices and began shouting to the prince: “Do you think that you can continue to raise your hand against Jews? You will have an unhappy ending; you won’t return home alive!”

The prince immediately began to conjure up demons, commanding them to bring a large iron post that 30 men could not lift. He then raised it with a single hand and firmly planted it into the ground.

He turned to Rabbi Dan and said, “Lift this post out of the ground. Otherwise I will kill all the Jews here without pity, for my anger has been aroused, and you will be responsible for their deaths!”

Rabbi Dan was not shaken by the prince’s order, and he scoffed by asking: “How can I remove this post from the depths of the earth?” He then took out a flask of water from his sack, washed his hands, and said: “Hear me, my brothers the Children of Israel, as well as you the other peoples, and you the sorcerer prince: I know your secret, and although you sent this post into the earth, with G-d’s help I will remove it.”

Everyone watching was stunned, but they saw Rabbi Dan digging a hole in the ground with his little finger. A few moments later, he lifted the iron post out of the ground without any difficulty. In fact he lifted it into the air!

“Now show me your wisdom,” he said to the prince, “and draw the post down to the earth. Otherwise, the community will see your head hanging from this post on this very day. I will then send it to a dry wilderness, to a desolate place where no man passes.” The prince attempted with his magic to pull the post down, but he failed because demons have no power over objects suspended in the air. He was thus defeated and humiliated.

In a new attempt, he said to Rabbi Dan: “Now I will do something else, and we will forget what just happened.” Using his magic, he brought two large millstones together and grinded them against each other until they were reduced to fine dust. From this dust, he returned them to their original form. When he was finished, he turned to Rabbi Dan and said: “Do the same.”

“That’s nothing special,” scoffed Rabbi Dan, “since stones were only created to serve man, and we have a single Creator Who makes peace and creates all things. I believe with complete faith that the Creator, and He alone, can help me do this.” Rabbi Dan immediately took two stones and grinded them against each other until they became fine powder, and then returned them to their original form with a powerful wind. In fact they were even larger than the prince’s stones.

(Continued next week)

From Hoshea to Joshua

It is written, “Moshe called Hoshea bin Nun ‘Joshua’ ” (Bamidbar 13:16).

In his book Ben Ish Hai, Rabbi Yosef Haim Zatzal cites Ashkenaz rabbis in explaining why the term bin is punctuated with the vowel chirik instead of the vowel segol (ben), which is the norm: When the Holy One, blessed be He, took away the letter yud from the name Sarai, this letter complained that it had been removed from the name of a righteous woman. G-d said to it, “I will place you in the name of another righteous person, who is a man.” He did not specify who this man was. When Joshua came, the letter yud was given to him, for he was initially called Hoshea.

The letter yud in Sarai had no vowel at all. Yet here, for Joshua, it earned a vowel when placed in his name, a sheva.

Where did this sheva come from? Two dots were removed from the segol found beneath the term ben. Hashem made a sheva from it and placed this sheva under the yud of Joshua, meaning that under the term ben there was just one dot remaining, a chirik, resulting in the term bin.

Why for Joshua?

It is written, “Moshe called Hoshea bin Nun ‘Joshua’ ” (Bamidbar 13:16).

The gaon Rabbi Machluf Hacohen Zatzal, in Minchat Ani, cites the Kessef Nivchar in explaining why Moshe prayed for Joshua but not for Caleb. Since Joshua was the grandson of Yosef, who had uttered slanderous words, there was a danger that Joshua would let himself be dragged into doing the same. Such was not the case for Caleb the son of Yephuneh, who was from the tribe of Judah, for “Judah became His sanctuary” (Tehillim 114:2). This is why Moshe prayed with special fervor for Joshua.

Another reason is that Moshe was afraid that when the Children of Israel would hear the prophesy of Eldad and Medad – according to which Joshua was going to bring them into the land of Israel, while Moshe would die in the desert – they would do everything to prevent Joshua from bringing them into the land. They would do this either because of their love for Moshe, wanting him to be the one to bring them into the land, or because of their jealousy of Joshua. This is why Moshe prayed for him in particular.

The Glory of the King

It is written, “Hashem said, ‘I have forgiven according to your words’ ” (Bamidbar 14:20).

There is something quite surprising here. We know that when “a father forgoes the honor due to him, one may avail himself of this permission. When a king forgoes the honor due to him, one may not avail himself of this permission.” Thus how could G-d tell Moshe, “I have forgiven according to your words,” since a king cannot forgive someone for neglecting the honor due to him?

The book Kyriat Arba cites Rav Tzion Bunam in explaining this by the juxtaposition of the verses: “Hashem said, ‘I have forgiven according to your words’ ” (v.20) and “As surely as I live, and the glory of Hashem fills the entire world” (v.21).

Although we know that “when a king forgoes the honor due to him, one may not avail himself of this permission,” this applies to a king of flesh and blood. Regarding the Holy One, blessed be He – Who reigns over the entire earth, as it is said: “the glory of Hashem fills the entire world” – He may renounce this honor by forgiving one who neglects it.

A Favorable Time

It is written, “You shall not follow after your heart and after your eyes, by which you go astray” (Bamidbar 15:39).

Our teacher Rabbi Meir Abuhatzera Zatzal said that the best and surest way for a person to grow in the true fear of Heaven is to guard his eyes and his tongue. One who succeeds in doing so, he promises, will attain lofty levels in the fear of Heaven and the service of the Creator.

What’s more, writes Rav Aharon Rote Zatzal in Shomer Emunim, is that when a person is walking in the street and encounters forbidden sights, yet conquers his evil inclination by not looking at them, it becomes a favorable time in Heaven. All the prayers that he makes at that point will have a great likelihood of being granted.

In the Light of the Parsha

Man Must Not Rely on His Own Efforts

Although a person has a duty to make an effort in every area, he is forbidden from putting his confidence in his effort, as Rabbeinu Menachem HaMeiri Zatzal states (Tehillim 128): “We must always realize, when we are putting an effort into something, that although it is good to make an effort, we must not rely on it.”

This was the mistake of the Children of Israel in the desert. Despite the fact that G-d promised them that Eretz Israel was a land flowing with milk and honey, they wanted to put an effort into minimizing miracles when entering the land. Hence they asked Moshe to send spies to observe the land, to uncover its entrances and exits in order to conquer it through natural means.

This initiative turned out badly, for they placed their trust in their effort and in the spies. The result was that they grew wicked and became unbelievers, insulting Heaven by stating: “For they are stronger mimenu [than we]” (Bamidbar 13:31), which the Sages invite us to read as mimeno (“than Him”). They meant to say that even G-d could not fight the peoples living in Eretz Israel.

Hence in regards to the spies, the Sages said: “Just as their return was with an evil intention, likewise their departure was with an evil intention” (Sotah 35a). Now this is difficult to understand, for they were good, not evil, when they departed! However since the Children of Israel placed their trust solely in their own efforts by forgetting Hashem, they misinterpreted things to such an extent that they all became wicked.

We may therefore say that they became wicked only because their efforts tended towards evil. If they had acted just to minimize miracles, they would have continued putting their faith in Hashem, as Jacob did, and they would have succeeded. Because they failed to do this, however, they ruined everything. It is in this regard that our Sages said: “Caleb distanced himself from the plan of the spies and went to pray by the graves of the Patriarchs, saying to them: ‘My fathers, pray on my behalf that I may be delivered from the plan of the spies’ ” (Sotah 34b).

Why did Caleb go and pray by the graves of the Patriarchs? Given that the Patriarchs, while still making efforts, continued to put all their faith in G-d, Caleb wanted to do the same, which is why he went to implore G-d for mercy by their graves.

Bringing Them Back with Bonds of Love

“All Israel has a portion in the World to Come.” The Sages cite several individuals who do not fit into this category, meaning that they have no portion in the World to Come, as the Sages state: “All Israel has a portion in the World to Come, for it is written, ‘Your people are all righteous; they shall inherit the land forever, the branch of My planting, the work of My hands, that I may be glorified’ [Isaiah 60:22]. Yet the following have no portion in it: He who maintains that the resurrection is not a Biblical doctrine, that the Torah was not Divinely revealed, and an epicurus [heretic]” (Mishnah in Sanhedrin 90a).

This concept of an epicurus, cited in the Mishnah, has its origins in this week’s parsha: “For he scorned the word of Hashem and he broke His commandment, that soul shall be utterly cut off; his sin is upon him” (Bamidbar 15:31).

In the Gemara we find an explanation for the start of this verse: “For he scorned the word of Hashem refers to an epicurus” (Sanhedrin 99a), whereas in the Sifri we derive this from the end of the verse: “he broke His commandment – this is the epicurus.”

What is an Epicurus?

The commentators have given several explanations for this term:

Rabbeinu Ovadia of Bartenura (on Pirkei Avoth 2:14) explains the term epicurus as being related to the root hefker (ownerless). It therefore refers to someone who scorns the Torah and considers it as being hefker, meaning abandoned.

Another explanation is someone who considers himself as being hefker (without any attachment), and having no compassion for himself. In fact he does not realize the harm that he is doing to himself by scorning the Torah or those who study it.

The author of the Torah commentary Sifte Chachamim, Rabbi Shabtai of Prague Zatzal, states on Devarim 1:12 that the term epicursim means “rebels.” It is a composite term formed by two words: ephic-resen. In other words, restraint (resen) is removed (muphac) from them. They go through life without any restraint, which is why they rebel, like a horse without a bridle.

We find another idea cited from the Tashbetz: Epicursim carry the name of the philosopher Epicur, who denied the existence of G-d.

Who is an Epicurus?

In regards to the deeds of an epicurus himself, our Sages have various opinions. What follows is from Sanhedrin 99b-100a:

“Rav and Rabbi Chanina both taught that this means one who insults a scholar. Rabbi Yochanan and Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi maintained that it is one who insults his neighbor in the presence of a scholar. ... Rabbi Nachman said: [An epicurus is] one who calls his teacher by his name.”

In Hilchot Teshuvah 3:8, the Rambam indicates that the term epicurus applies to three kinds of people:

“One who denies the existence of prophecy and maintains that there is no knowledge communicated from G-d to the hearts of men; one who disputes the prophecy of Moshe Rabbeinu; one who maintains that the Creator is not aware of the deeds of men. Each of these three individuals is an epicurus.”

In the same chapter, the Rambam states: “There are other sins which are less severe than those mentioned. Nevertheless, our Sages said that a person who frequently commits them will not receive a portion in the World to Come, and that these [sins] must be avoided and care should be taken in regards to them. They are: One who invents a [disparaging] nickname for a colleague; one who calls a colleague by a [disparaging] nickname; one who embarrasses a colleague in public; one who takes pride in his colleague’s shame; one who disgraces Torah sages; one who disgraces his teachers; one who degrades the festivals; and one who profanes sacred things” (Hilchot Teshuvah 3:14).

In his book Kessef Mishneh, Rabbi Yosef Karo deals with the obvious question that arises from the words of the Rambam: In tractate Sanhedrin, the question is raised as to who an epicurus is. Rav and Rabbi Chanina both taught that this refers to one who insults a scholar. Rabbi Yochanan and Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi maintained that it is one who insults his neighbor in the presence of a scholar. We therefore have to explain why the Rambam did not cite these opinions, but instead mentioned three things (not cited in the Gemara) that earn a person the designation of epicurus.

The gaon Rabbi Avraham Di Boton Zatzal deals with this question, among others, in his book Lechem Mishneh. As another source, he cites a passage from the Rambam in which he states something else that is also included in the category of epicursim:

“The term minim refers to Jewish idolaters or those who perform transgressions for the sake of angering G-d, even if one eats non-kosher meat for the sake of angering G-d or wears shatnez for the sake of angering G-d. The term epicursim refers to Jews who deny the Torah and the concept of prophecy” (Hilchot Rotzeach 4:10).

Elsewhere, we find the Rambam stating: “Minim are those who follow the impulses of their hearts with respect to the aforementioned matters, so much so that they transgress the key commandments of the Torah in contempt and brazenness, and they will say that they are not sinning” (Hilchot Avodah Zarah 2:5).

The explanation found in Lechem Mishneh is that the term epicurus is sometimes borrowed, and that people are called epicursim when they are not really so. Instead, they are at the edge of this viewpoint, as the Rambam himself mentions in his commentary on the Mishnah (Chullin 1b). These are the ones who deny the Torah and deny the oral tradition, such as Tzadok and Boethius, who are idolaters, or who commit sins by rebellion, all being included in the generic term epicursim.

Practical Differences

There are practical differences between the definitions of the Rambam and the Gemara on the identity of an epicurus. Naturally, in this article we cannot indicate all the details of these laws (most of which appear in the Rambam), but only a broad outline.

Those who deny the Torah and prophecy cannot be accepted as witnesses, their shechita is as impure as that of a non-Jew, we do not return lost objects to them, and their relatives do not mourn for them when they die.

In regards to one who scorns a talmid chacham and other such things, which the Gemara considers as the behavior of epicursim, the Maharil points out (Responsa Maharil 194) that he is not included in this category. This is because this prohibition appears less severe to him, and he teaches that it is permissible, though he has no doubts about the other prohibitions.

We cannot finish this article before citing the opinion of the Chazon Ish Zatzal (Yoreh Deah 13:16), who writes that in our time, since we no longer see open miracles, and since punishments no longer serve as a deterrent, these laws no longer apply. “On the contrary, we must bring them back with bonds of love and show them the light as much as possible.”

Guard Your Tongue

Excessive Praise

If someone wants to speak about a certain individual to another person, and he has reason to believe that these two do not get along, and that his listener may speak ill of him, then it is best to avoid speaking about him.

It is forbidden to praise someone excessively, even if not in the presence of people who dislike him. This is because it often happens that the speaker himself will end his praise by adding “except for his character fault of....” His listeners will then add, “Why are you praising him so much, since he has such a fault?” – Chafetz Chaim