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The Path to Follow

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THE SIN OF THE SPIES AND THE GREATNESS OF JOSHUA

Rabbi David Pinto Chlita

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 of Shelach lecha anashim ("Send for yourself men") form the term chacham ("wise man"). This means that they had to be wise and righteous men. There are several questions that we may raise about the spies, questions that we shall examine individually in order to see how they can be answered. First, why did Moshe receive the order to specifically send wise and righteous men? Did their wisdom help them to accomplish anything during their mission? Despite their wisdom, they created a disaster by disparaging the land of Israel. Second, how was it possible for righteous men to cause such a calamity? Third, on the verse, "Let us appoint a head, and let us return to Egypt" (Bamidbar 14:4), Rashi cites our Sages as saying that this is the language of idolatry, meaning that they wanted to return to Egypt with an idol leading them. Had they forgotten what had happened during the sin of the golden calf, when they were almost wiped out? Yet now they wanted to do the very same thing! Furthermore, how was it possible for the generation of the desert – a generation of knowledge (Vayikra Rabba 9:1) that witnessed the greatest revelation in history, was surrounded by the Clouds of Glory, and for whom the manna descended – to say, "For they are stronger than we" (Bamidbar 13:31)? Here our Sages teach, "Do not read 'we' [mimenu] but 'Him' [mimeno, i.e., Hashem]" (Sotah 35a). Why did the spies disparage the land? Because they wanted to retain their position as tribal leaders in the desert, and if they had entered the land, they would no longer have remained as leaders.

This is surprising! Because they sought the glory of being a tribal leader, they ended up disparaging the land of Israel and Hashem? Furthermore, what could they have gained by retaining their position? Did they think that they could retain it for the rest of their lives? To explain this, we must begin by examining several other 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), since He had already praised the land of Israel to them.

As a result, was there any reason to doubt the words of Hashem, especially since they were living in the desert, until that point, like in the Garden of Eden? Therefore why the desire to send spies? At

first they could be given the benefit of the doubt, for it was against Moshe that they were protesting. It's true that they experienced miracles on a daily basis within the desert. Yet once they entered the land, they would be forced to live according to natural laws. Hence they wanted to send spies to see how the Canaanites lived, in order to easily conquer the land and defeat its inhabitants. In response to this request from the Children of Israel, the Holy One, blessed be He, answered Moshe: "Send for yourself wise men." Now we know that a wise man is superior to a prophet (Bava Batra 12a), and because of their wisdom and righteousness, they would quickly understand how they could conquer the land in a natural way and defeat the Canaanites. This was true even if they were strong and possessed fortified cities, and despite the fact that all this was completely unnecessary, since G-d would fight for them and they would win even if not in a natural way. In fact these very same men were righteous while in the camp, as Rashi explains (Bamidbar 13:3), being wise men who knew how to reason (Chagigah 14).

The Holy One, blessed be He, expected them to not explore the land. Instead, as tribal leaders, it was incumbent upon them to tell the Children of Israel that there was no reason for such a mission, since they had a promise from G-d that the land was good.

As such, they could have easily defeated the Canaanites. Therefore precisely when Hashem asked Moshe to send wise men, He wanted these men to understand with their wisdom, before leaving on their mission, that there was no reason to go, and He expected them to remain. Yet instead of doing Hashem's will by not going, these wise men – who could understand that there was no reason to go – not only did they not possess such wisdom, but on the contrary, when they went to explore the land, they disparaged it! All this because they wanted one thing.

In reality, they should never have gone to explore the land, for it was exceedingly good. Yet because they were looking for an excuse, the Holy One, blessed be He, provided them with one. In this way, they could be punished measure for measure (Shabbat 105b). In fact man is guided along the path that he chooses to take (Makkot 10b), which is why the verse compares the return of the spies to their departure: Just as their return was with an evil intention, likewise their departure was with an evil intention (Sotah 35a). Hence it is written, "And they went and they came" (Bamidbar 13:26).

This requires an explanation, for the spies were righteous when they left! We can understand this, however, according to what we have just said,



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namely that the Holy One, blessed be He, believed that since they were wise and righteous men, they would convince the Children of Israel that such an undertaking was useless. Yet given that they actually departed, it indicates that they did so with an evil intention.

We may say that they caused these problems because they had just been appointed as tribal leaders, and perhaps they had grown proud and did not want to lose their greatness by entering Eretz Israel. Even if we say that their intentions may have been good, since they knew that leaders of the community merit great sanctity from Heaven because they guide the Jewish people, nevertheless their intentions were deficient vis-à-vis the will of G-d. This is because G-d had said that He would bring Israel up from the dryness of Egypt to a land of rivers.

This also allows us to understand the question that we asked: How could they have spoken against Hashem by saying, “They are stronger

than Him”? Tractate Sotah explains that whoever is proud, he is like an idolater. Thus if we say that they failed due to their pride – something that Hashem does not tolerate – it is because they held an idolatrous belief before Hashem. In regards to Joshua being sent with them, we may explain that Moshe wanted, even if the other spies failed, for someone to reprimand them and protect the honor of Heaven by openly proclaiming that the word of Hashem was true and firm. The letter yud that Moshe added to Joshua’s name, which has a numerical value (when spelled out in full) of 20, 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 to make Him loved by man in joy and peace. Amen.

Real Life Stories

An Explicit Promise from the Author of Shomrei Emunim

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

Among the great trials that our generations faces, we note the tremendous depravity that breaks all the bounds of modesty and holiness, and which renders the saying, “We are prevented from walking in the street” concrete and full of meaning. Each excursion is filled with traps, transgressions, and severe trials that are without equal. A person who is not especially vigilant is liable to lose, G-d forbid, his spiritual gains in the blink of an eye.

Nevertheless, we must realize that it is possible to gain something from such a difficult situation! Let us look at a Torah scholar’s letter cited in the book *Aleinu Leshabeach*:

“The gaon Rabbi Yitzchak Zilberstein once recounted in the name of Rabbi Aharon Roth, the author of *Shomrei Emunim*, that if someone finds himself confronted by an indecent sight, he must control himself and turn his gaze away so as not to look. All the requests that he makes to the Creator at that point will be answered.

“I had preciously retained this extraordinary ‘promise,’ but had never tested it. Thank G-d, I study in a kollel in Ofakim, and I do not go out often. I have not seen all these ugly sights, which have infiltrated the large cities.

“Not long ago, I had to travel to Tel Aviv for an emergency, and there I came across a sight that was truly indecent. I then remembered the words of the *Shomrei Emunim*: Hashem sent me an opportunity to become worthy! I then closed my eyes and left that place, managing to navigate through this obstacle in peace.

“In actuality, I had traveled to Tel Aviv because of a serious illness affecting my daughter. She was hospitalized in Beersheba, and the doctors treating her had sent me to look for special medicine that could only be found in major cities.

“I therefore prayed to Hashem to spare my daughter all harm and to protect her from her serious illness. I said this prayer while weeping a torrent of tears, for besides the suffering that we endured on account of my daughter’s illness, I felt very close to G-d at that point because of the trial that I had just overcome. I then continued on my way to the pharmacy, which sold the rare medicine that I was seeking.

“Having almost reached my destination, I heard my phone ring. It was my wife, who had remained at our daughter’s bedside at the hospital.

“She seemed overwhelmed. Half a minute went by before she could tell me that just a few moments earlier, our little girl’s condition had suddenly improved, making even the stunned doctors say that the medicine I was seeking was no longer necessary.

“It is easy to imagine the spiritual experience that I had at that point. A few minutes earlier, I had burst into tears because of the immense sorrow that my family and I felt on account of our daughter’s illness and suffering. Yet now my tears were spilling again, but this time it was because of my gratitude to G-d. I thanked Him for having turned my mourning into dancing, for having removed my sackcloth and girded me with joy [Tehillim 30:12].”

The explicit promise of the *Shomrei Emunim* obviously does not need to be proved. Nevertheless, such an experience allows a person to intensify his faith in G-d and His tzaddikim, who fulfill His will. Of course, it is preferable to never have to endure trials in order to obtain a reward – that much is clear! However if we find ourselves confronted by trials, we should appreciate the great kindness that Hashem is showing us. Starting from the elements that represent the highest degree of impurity, He brings great deliverance – something that a person would never have experienced without going through it, deliverance made possible by this great trial.

The obligation incumbent upon us is to “not follow after your heart and after your eyes.” This great awakening has its source in Parsha Bereshith, where we read: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and cling to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (Bereshith 2:24). Here Rashi explains, “The Holy Spirit says this to prohibit forbidden unions with Noahides.”

Siftei Chachamim points out that Rashi derives his explanation from the term “therefore.” G-d said, “I did a great kindness to Adam by giving him a wife from his side, so that he could cleave to her and not fall into forbidden relations.” We find the same reasoning in the verse, “Who brought you out of the land of Egypt” (Shemot 20:2), which means: “I liberated you in order that you may fulfill mitzvot.”

Therefore out of gratitude to G-d, Who has given us a wife, we must guard ourselves from forbidden relations, and prevent ourselves from looking at all indecent sights.

A Double Sendoff

It is written, “One man, each from his father’s tribe, shall you send, all eminent men among them” (Bamidbar 13:2).

Since the verse says, “all eminent men among them,” what does “each from his father’s tribe” mean?

Rabbi Yochanan said, “They sent twelve spies and twelve leaders of the community.”

He said, “Even the servants who accompanied them were [impious] like them.”

– Likut Pitron Torah

A Great Cry

It is written, “Strengthen yourselves and take from the fruit of the land” (Bamidbar 13:20).

When they reached Hamath, Moshe said to them: “Do not enter as thieves but strengthen yourselves and take from the fruit of the land.” The Emorim thought, “These people have only come to cut down our trees and burn our cities!” Hence they pursued and attacked them.

Ahiman, Sheshai, and Talmi thus pursued them all the way to the plain of Hamath, which is in the territory of Judah, and Caleb fell behind the border. Realizing that they had led them into the territory of Israel, he arose and let out a great cry. Everyone then fell before him, and he exclaimed: “Why have you come? Because we took five pomegranates and a cluster of grapes?” They replied, “We came because your intention was to burn our cities!”

Upon returning to Moshe, the spies disparaged the land by saying: “There we saw giants, the sons of Anak” (Bamidbar 13:20).

– Shir Hashirim Zutah

The Departure of Truth

It is written, “Hashem, slow to anger, abundant in kindness, forgiver of iniquity and willful sin, and Who cleanses – but does not cleanse completely, recalling the iniquity of parents upon children to the third and fourth generations” (Bamidbar 14:18).

Rabbi Yitzchak asked, “Why is the attribute of truth not mentioned here [as it is in Sefer Shemot]?”

Rabbi Chiya replied, “They caused the mention of this attribute to depart by acting with falsehood, for G-d acts measure for measure with man in accordance with his deeds.”

For an Eternal Reminder

It is written, “Speak to the Children of Israel, and tell them to make tzitzit [fringes]” (Bamidbar 15:38).

Why is the passage regarding tzitzit juxtaposed to the incident of the mekoshesh etzim (the man gathering wood on Shabbat)?

Upon seeing him gathering wood, people said to him: “Why are you desecrating Shabbat? Have you not heard that ‘whoever transgresses it shall be put to death’?”

He replied, “I heard, but I forgot!”

Hence G-d told Moshe, “Speak to the Children of Israel, and tell them to make tzitzit.” The word tzitzit is similar to the terms siman or tziyun, for tzitzit are a sign for Israel to remember the mitzvot.

Thus He said, “You shall look upon them [the tzitzit] and remember all the commandments of Hashem” (v.39).

– Lekach Tov

How Tzaddikim Committed the Deadly Sin of Slander

Our Sages say, “See just how great is the power of an evil tongue! From where do we learn this? From the spies, for if such things occurred to those who bought an evil report against wood and stones, how much more will it occur to one who brings an evil report against his fellow!” (Arachin 15a).

How could the spies have known that their slanderous words (against wood and stones) were abhorrent? “From what happened to Miriam,” we may think. However she criticized people, not stones! Nevertheless, even if we believe that maligning wood and stones is like speaking Lashon Harah, then why were the spies not afflicted by leprosy, as was Miriam? Why were they punished by death brought on by a plague? In fact the punishment of a slanderer is leprosy, not a plague, as our Sages affirm: “Whoever speaks Lashon Harah will be afflicted by leprosy” (Tanhuma Metzora 1).

Furthermore, the verse mentions that these men were great tzaddikim, as it is written: “All eminent men” (Bamidbar 13:2). Here the Midrash (Bamidbar Rabba 16:5) explains that they were chosen from among all Israel by Hashem and Moshe. In fact Moshe later said, “The idea was good in my eyes, so I took 12 men from among you” (Devarim 1:23). This confirms that these men were righteous in the eyes of Israel and Moshe, who decided to send them only after having consulted Hashem and received His consent in regards to each of them, tribe by tribe. In that case, we may still ask why Moshe uttered a special prayer for Joshua’s protection. Were they not all righteous men at that point?

We must admit that all these men were tzaddikim at the outset, but deteriorated afterwards. In that case, a serious question arises: How could these tzaddikim commit the terrible sin of distancing the Children of Israel from Hashem by advocating rebellion against the land of Israel, thus awakening G-d’s anger against His people? In fact what they did led to exile and destruction, a disaster for all the generations to come!

Elsewhere we learn that “if through the animals of the tzaddikim, the Holy One, blessed be He, does not cause a sin to be committed, how much less through the tzaddikim themselves!” (Yebamot 99b). In that case, why were these men the exception?

Let us try and find an answer in the Midrash: “The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moshe: ‘Although it is to the Patriarchs that I made a promise to give them the land, and although they are dead, I will not go back [on My promise]’” (Bamidbar Rabba 16:3). From this declaration, we learn that Hashem offered the land of Israel to Abraham and his offspring, for he demonstrated selflessness for the sake of mitzvot, made G-d’s Name reign, and brought people under the wings of the Shechinah. By the merit of our Patriarchs, G-d granted special sanctity to this land and placed it under His complete authority and dominion, as it is written: “A land that Hashem your G-d seeks out. The eyes of Hashem your G-d are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to year’s end” (Devarim 11:12).

That being the case, did the Children of Israel need to explore the land and verify its goodness for themselves? Even if they went with the healthy intention of discovering the places where the Canaanites hid their treasures – so that G-d’s word would not be questioned by the people later on – why should men search out the land, since Hashem had already promised that the Children of Israel would find homes there filled with good things? Such an attitude, which stemmed from a lack of respect for their Master, transformed them into impious men, even if their intentions were pure.

How right are the words of the Sages, who said: “One transgression brings about another” (Pirkei Avoth 4:2)! Rabbeinu Yona explains this adage as follows: “After having committed a transgression and becoming distant from the service of G-d, we will end up committing a second transgression, even when the evil inclination does not entice us as much as it did to commit the first, for it is our desires that control us then. Even if our desires are not as great, we will commit all kinds of transgressions, the only reason being that we have grown accustomed to committing every kind of abomination that G-d hates.”

Thus despite their piety, since the spies questioned G-d’s ways, they eventually committed an even graver transgression. That is, they insulted Hashem and their lips made them transgress by saying: “For they [the Canaanites] are stronger than we” (Bamidbar 13:31). Our Sages (Sotah 35a) explain that the words of the spies were very significant, and that we should understand them not as “we” (mimenu), but as “Him” (mimeno), so to speak.

Prayer

The gaon Rabbi Yehonatan Eibeshutz revealed a great secret in regards to prayer: In our prayers, we must focus on asking G-d to help us achieve integrity, as well as the merit of giving Him satisfaction.

He said the following (Ye'arot Devash Derush 5):

The main focus of our prayers must consist of a desire to attain perfection, to become meritorious and give satisfaction to our Creator. This is in addition, of course, to our prayers concerning the exile of the Shechinah, the exile of Israel, and the disappearance of integrity in this world. Even when we ask for material possessions, our goal must not be to accumulate unnecessary riches out of desire or greed, but simply to not lack anything that could hinder our service of G-d.

In reality, because of our numerous sins, because everything is lacking, we have lost all wisdom and every sense of proper conduct. Men of treachery and violence grow in number, the righteous cannot protest, the wisdom of the poor is ridiculed, and nobody listens to their words.

Hence we must pray to Hashem for the means to study in relative ease without having to make requests of anyone. In regards to a person who does not occupy himself with Torah study, he should pray that he never resorts to theft, violence, or dishonesty in order to earn a living. He should pray not to encroach upon the boundaries of his neighbor, not to experience jealousy or be involved either with disputes or ill-gotten gains, and even to encourage the weak and support the poor.

Supporting those who devote themselves to the study of Torah is essential to our life. It is the foundation of perfection and the reward for all that is truly good, that which was ours and which we lost. In fact it is the last thing that G-d has left us in His immense kindness: Hashem has nothing in His world other than four cubits of Halachah, which replace sacrifice and incense, thanks to which the Shechinah dwelled above the Holy Ark. In our time, those who genuinely study Torah merit the Shechinah in their presence and in the presence of those who support them, maintaining the pillar of Torah and participating in the construction of the Beit Hamikdash. Happy is the one who supports the Tree of Life.

It is therefore from this perspective that we should ask Hashem to grant us wealth. If this is not our intention, then the material possessions we receive will end up becoming a source of misfortune. This is because they will be controlled by evil spirits, and we will no longer be in control of them. As we read, a "sore evil" (Kohelet 5:12) will afflict him, for he seeks material wealth out of sheer desire, not to support the poor and those who study Torah. As a result, he will not be able to properly use such wealth, for evil spirits will control it.

This is why the Birkat Kohanim states, "May G-d bless you" – with material possessions. Yet what good is there in having money that was amassed to our sorrow, and which will lead us to Gehinnom, G-d forbid? Hence it adds, "and protect you" – from evil spirits. May we always be able to use our money for the good.

Eternal Values

Likewise, when we pray for long life, it should be with the intention of devoting it to the fulfillment of G-d's will. As our Sages affirm, "One hour of repentance and good deeds in this world is better than all the life of the World to Come" (Pirkei Avoth 4:17). Furthermore, our numerous sins and the burden of exile in our time still delay our access to wisdom, truth, and integrity. Thus if we only attain it at an advanced age, leaving this world prematurely is like not having lived, considered to be like "never having seen the day." In fact what do we gain from our labor, and what will we have amassed by our work to bring an offering before G-d?

Is it not true that "the reaper has gathered nothing"?

Finally, many of us would need to live more than a thousand years in order to repent of the sins of our youth, to return to Hashem, and to rectify what we have damaged in a single day of disobedience to G-d.

This is why our prayers must be aimed in the right direction: Everything must be for the truth, not for falsehood or vanity, which characterize this world of substitution and reversal, one devoid of eternal values.

Establishing a Place for Prayer

A nice parable is recorded in the writings of the Arizal: A king decides to besiege a certain city, and so he attempts to breach its walls. He uses a canon and aims it at the same spot on the wall, hoping to create an opening in it.

If the king had been foolish, he would have aimed his canon each time at a different spot on the wall. The wall would have remained standing in that case, and all his efforts would have been in vain.

Likewise, since the destruction of the Temple, iron walls have arisen between Hashem and us. Our prayers must therefore be like a canon: If we always pray at the same spot, we will be able to create an opening in this wall of iron. Otherwise, no opening will be created. Thus everyone should be committed to finding his own synagogue, one where he can also establish his own specific place.

– Siddur Otzar Hatefillot

The Faithful Ones - Accounts from the Tzaddikim of the Pinto Family

Our teacher Shlita recounted an incredible story to us:

"One of my students, Shimon Elza, experienced a serious misfortune: Doctors told him that he could not have children. All his brothers and sisters, as well as all the brothers and sisters of his wife, had children. This greatly saddened him, and every year he would travel to Morocco for the Hilloula of the tzaddik Rabbi Haim Pinto, may his merit protect us.

"On Elul 26, he prostrated himself over the grave of the tzaddik while weeping bitter tears. He implored the Holy One, blessed be He, to grant him offspring, something that deeply touched me.

"In 5763 he arrived in Morocco for the Hilloula, as he did every year, and again wept before the grave of the tzaddik. Everyone prayed for him and his wife to have children: 'May it be G-d's will that next year you return with your wife and son, a small child that you will name Haim, like the tzaddik, may his merit protect us.' Everyone then responded Amen to this moving blessing.

"As it turned out, his wife conceived and nine months later she gave birth to a boy.

"The circumcision took place on the Sunday of Parsha Balak in 5764.

Guard Your Tongue

A Person Known to be Upright and Just

If we want to praise a person who is widely known to be upright and just, one in whom there is no fault or sin, we may praise him even in the presence of those who hate him or are jealous of him! This is because they cannot disparage him. If they were to try, everyone would realize that they are just making up stories.

– Chafetz Chaim