

PARSHAT SHLACH

What was so terrible about the sin of the "meraglim"? After all, they were instructed to report the facts, and that's exactly what they did!

Furthermore, even if we consider their report as deliberately slanted, why was the entire nation punished so harshly for being misled by a small group?

Finally, even if the people's initial reaction was improper, immediately afterward they repent by declaring their willingness to take the challenge of conquering the Land! Shouldn't this repentance have been accepted?

Why then is "dor ha'midbar" [the generation of the desert] punished so severely? Why must Am Yisrael wander for forty years until they perish! This week's shiur examines this tragic event in an attempt to understand why.

INTRODUCTION

Before we begin our study, an important point of nomenclature. Although this event is commonly referred to as "chet ha'meraglim" - the sin of the SPIES, in Parshat Shlach they are NEVER referred to as such! Nevertheless, for the sake of convenience, our shiur will continue to refer to them as the "meraglim", even though their mission (as we will show) involved much more than just 'spying out the land'.

To understand the 'sin of the spies', we must first ascertain what their mission was. Therefore, our shiur begins with an attempt to identify its precise purpose by noting how the Torah describes this mission.

TOURISTS OR SPIES

In describing the mission of the meraglim, the Torah uses the verb "la'tur" (see 13:2,17 & 25). This verb can be translated as 'to tour' or 'to scout'. However, to arrive at a more precise understanding of what they were supposed to do, we must take a closer look at the psukim that describe their mission:

"And Moshe instructed them saying:

And you shall see the LAND, WHAT IT IS -

Are the people who live in STRONG or WEAK, FEW or MANY?

Is the Land GOOD or BAD?

Are the towns OPEN or FORTIFIED?

Is the SOIL RICH or POOR? Are there TREES?

[if so,] bring back samples of the fruit.. (13:17-20)

Clearly, these instructions entail more than a spy mission. Note as well that we find TWO categories of questions that the meraglim must answer:

- 1) Concerning the NATURE OF THE LAND -
i.e. to find out whether the Land is good or bad, the soil rich or poor, the trees fruitful, etc.
- 2) Concerning the FEASIBILITY OF CONQUEST -
i.e. to find out if the enemy is strong or weak, if the cities are fortified or open, etc.

These two categories show how this mission entails much more than the collection of military information. In fact, these questions seem to be describing a 'fact finding mission', much more than a 'spy mission'. Let's explain why:

A 'spy mission' is initiated when a military commander needs to acquire information (to prepare a battle plan). When doing so, usually a small group of men are sent secretly, and hence report back only to the military commanders (and certainly not to the entire nation).

Clearly, the mission of the meraglim in Parshat Shelach is quite different. These twelve men (a representative from each

tribe) are sent publicly, by the political leadership to gather information for the entire nation. This information will help Bnei Yisrael plan not only the conquest of the land, but also how to establish Eretz Canaan as their homeland.

[To support this point, simply compare Bamidbar 13:1-17 with 34:16-29, noting the textual similarities!]

REALISTIC NEEDS

To better appreciate the necessity of this mission, let's consider the realities that face Bnei Yisrael at this time.

Recall that the nation numbers over two million individuals. [This approximation is based on the extrapolation of the census figure of 600,000 men above age 20 (see Bamidbar chapter 26).] This nation, living in camp formation for the last year and a half, has been able to survive the difficult desert conditions only with God's providence, i.e. His miraculous daily supply of food and water. However, these special conditions were only temporary.

Even though God had promised to bring them to a land 'flowing with milk and honey', their existence in this 'promised land' will no longer be supported by God's daily miracles. Instead, they will have to till the soil and work the land for their food. [See Devarim 8:1-10, re: the purpose of the manna!]

Similarly, when Bnei Yisrael will enter the land, they will have to fight their battles through natural means. Surely, God will assist them; but they will now have to undertake their own initiatives. [See Devarim 11:22-25.]

Therefore, at this time, Bnei Yisrael must not only prepare themselves to conquer that land, but they must also make the necessary preparations for all aspects of the establishment of their new national homeland.

Taking this into consideration, it only makes sense that it would be necessary to send a 'national fact finding' mission to help plan not only how to conquer the land, but also how to establish its borders and partition, as well as its economy and agriculture etc. Hence, the meraglim are instructed to scout the land to determine not only the feasibility of its conquest, but also how to prepare the land for its two million new inhabitants!

To support this explanation, note how the Torah describes a similar 'appointment of officers' (forty years later, when the next generation prepares to enter the land):

"And God spoke to Moshe: These are the names of the men through whom the land shall be apportioned - Elazar the Kohen and Yehoshua bin Nun. And one NASI, one NASI from each tribe... and these are their names..." (see Bamidbar 34:16-29, note obvious parallels with 13:1-16)

UNDERSTANDING THE MISSION

Based on this introduction, we can better understand the opening pasuk of the Parsha:

"And God spoke to Moshe... send one man from EVERY TRIBE, each one a chieftain among them... all the men being LEADERS of Bnei Yisrael." (13:1-3)

Due to the nature of this mission, it is necessary to send a senior representative from each "shevet" (tribe). Similarly, this explains why the meraglim report back not only to Moshe, but to the entire public. [See 13:26.]

Had they been military spies, they would report ONLY to Moshe (or to the military commander), but definitely NOT to the entire nation! Furthermore, had they been military spies, there would be no reason to publicize their names, and certainly no reason to send tribal leaders. Quite the opposite! It is because they comprise a FACT FINDING MISSION - specifically a group of national leaders are sent, who later report back to the entire nation (see 13:26).

A PROOF FROM SEFER YEHOSHUA

To clarify this distinction between 'spies' and a 'commission of inquiry' it is helpful to compare these meraglim to the meraglim sent by Yehoshua [see this week's Haftarah]:

"And Yehoshua bin Nun SECRETLY sent two SPIES from Shittim saying: Go scout out the land and the area of

Yericho... (Yehoshua 2:1)
 "... and the two men returned... and they told YEHOSHUA concerning what happened to them." (2:24)

Note that in Sefer Yehoshua the spies are actually referred to as MERAGLIM. These meraglim are sent SECRETLY (we are not told their names) to SPY out the city and report back ONLY to Yehoshua. Clearly, their mission was purely military.

To highlight this contrast, the following table summarizes the differences between these two missions:

sent by Moshe =====	sent by Yehoshua =====
12 men	2 men
Tribal leaders publicly	unnamed secretly
"la'tur" (to tour)	"l'ragel" (to spy)
the type of land, [its fruit, its cities etc..]	only military information

Yehoshua's meraglim serve as military spies to help him plan HOW to conquer Yericho. Moshe's meraglim serve as an inquiry commission, sent to provide the people with information to help them plan the establishment of an entire nation with all its institutions.

ONE REPORT / TWO OPINIONS

Now that we have clarified the nature of the mission of Moshe's meraglim, we are ready to evaluate their report in order to determine what they did wrong.

Note that when the meraglim return, their report correlates perfectly with the double nature of their mission:

"and they returned to Moshe & Aharon and the ENTIRE NATION... and showed them the fruits of the land saying... it is indeed a LAND FLOWING WITH MILK & HONEY. Alas, for the people who live in that land are MIGHTY, and the cities are FORTIFIED... the Amalekites guard the south, the Chittites and Emorites control the mountain range, and the Canaanites command the planes..." (13:26-29)

Based on their findings, in regard to (1) the nature of the land, - the meraglim conclude that the land is SUPERB:

"and they showed them the fruits of the land saying... it is indeed a land flowing with milk and honey..." (13:26-27);

However, in regard to (2) the feasibility of its conquest, the meraglim conclude that conquering the people of Canaan appears to be almost impossible:

"Alas, for the people who live in that land are MIGHTY, and the cities are FORTIFIED... the Amalekites guard the south, the Chittites and Emorites control the mountain range, and the Canaanites command the planes..." (13:28-29).

These conclusions reflected the commission's MAJORITY opinion. However, Kalev and Yehoshua presented an opposite conclusion. Based on the same findings, they conclude that conquest of the Land is possible: "it is indeed FEASIBLE to conquer the Land..." (13:30)

Up until this point, it appears as though this commission is quite objective; they report the facts as perceived. All twelve members concur that the land is good, yet the enemy formidable. However, two opinions exist in regard to the feasibility of its conquest: The majority opinion concludes that it is futile to even attempt to conquer the land (see 13:31), while the dissenting opinion, presented by Kalev, argues that conquest is achievable (see 13:30).

The majority opinion appears to be logical and quite realistic. Why then is God so angered?

It is usually understood that the meraglim's sin stems from their lack of belief in God. After all, had they believed in Hashem, they would have arrived at the same conclusion as Kalev and Yehoshua. However, this understanding may be overly simplistic. Is it possible that ten out of the twelve tribal leaders, after

witnessing the miracles of the Exodus and their journey through the desert, do not believe in God and His ability to assist His nation in battle?

NO FAITH IN WHOM?

There can be no doubt that the tribal leaders and the entire nation as well, believe in God and the possibility of Divine assistance. Unfortunately, they are also well aware of the possibility of Divine punishment. Let's explain why:

Throughout their journey, not only had God intervened numerous times to help them; He had also intervened numerous times to PUNISH them. However, the meraglim are also aware that to be worthy of Divine assistance Bnei Yisrael must remain obedient at all times. This precise warning had already been raised at the conclusion of Parshat Mishpatim:

"Behold I am sending a 'malach' to lead into the Land... Be careful and listen to his voice, do not rebel against him, FOR HE WILL NOT PARDON YOUR SINS, for My Name is with him. For IF you will listen... and do everything that I command you, THEN I will help you DEFEAT and conquer your enemies..." (Shmot 23:20-25)

This warning clearly states that God's assistance is totally dependent on Bnei Yisrael's behavior. Should they not listen, they will fall before their enemies.

[Note how the story of Achan in Yehoshua 7:1-26 proves this assumption. There we find that the mere sin of one individual led to the defeat of the entire nation in battle.]

One could suggest that the conclusion of the meraglim is based on their assessment that Bnei Yisrael are not capable of retaining the spiritual level necessary to be worthy of miracles while conquering the Land. Realizing that the conquest would only be feasible with Divine assistance, they concur that conquest is impossible. In other words, the meraglim are not doubting God's ability to assist them in battle, RATHER they are doubting their own ability to be WORTHY of that assistance.

So what's so terrible? Is it not the job of leadership to realistically evaluate all of the relevant factors?

DIBAH - THE CHET OF THE MERAGLIM

It is precisely in this type of situation where leadership is critical! Ideal leadership should have challenged the nation to raise their spiritual level - to become worthy of Divine assistance - to rise to that challenge! The meraglim take a very different approach. Instead of rallying the nation to fulfill its destiny, the meraglim hide their spiritual cowardice behind a wall of hyperbole!

To support this point, note their reaction to Kalev's 'dissenting opinion' (in 13:30), for it sheds light on their true character:

"But the people who went up with him said: We cannot attack that people for it is stronger than we. And they spread DIBAT HA'ARETZ among Bnei Yisrael saying: The land which we visited is one that DEVOURS ITS INHABITANTS, ALL the people who we saw there are GIANT... we looked like GRASSHOPPERS to ourselves, and that is HOW THEY SAW US." (13:31-33)

These are not the objective statements of a 'fact finding mission'! Rather, they comprise a presentation of hysterical exaggerations made in a desperate attempt to shape public opinion. A land does not 'devour' its inhabitants, nor is it likely that the Canaanites perceived them as 'grasshoppers'! It is precisely this rebuttal that the Torah refers to as "dibah" - SLANDER. Let's explain why.

Instead of confessing their true fear and lack of confidence in the nation's ability, they over-exaggerate the seriousness of the situation. Rather than encourage the people to prepare themselves for the task, they prefer to utilize populist politics and create fear in the camp.

Finally, note how the word "dibah" is central when the Torah summarizes their punishment:

"And those men - MOTZIEY DIBAT HA'ARETZ RA'AH - died in a plague before God." (see 14:37)

In contrast, Kalev and Yehoshua exhibit proper leadership, as exemplified in their rebuttal of this argument. Note once again how the entire argument hinges on Am Yisrael's special relationship with God:

"im chafetz banu Hashem" - If God truly wants us [to be His nation], surely He will bring us into the land... only YOU MUST NOT REBEL against God, and you should not FEAR the people of the land for they are our prey... for GOD WILL BE WITH US - [hence] do not fear them." (14:8-9)

Unfortunately, the argument of the meraglim was more convincing, and the people concluded that attacking Eretz Canaan at this time would be suicidal (see 14:1-4). Considering that staying in the desert was no better of a long-term option, the nation concludes that their only 'realistic' option is to return to Egypt (see 14:3-5). The attempt of Yehoshua and Kalev to convince the people otherwise was futile (see 14:6-9). Bnei Yisrael prefer returning to Egypt instead of taking the challenge of becoming God's special nation in Eretz Canaan.

Based on our explanation thus far, only the meraglim should have been punished, for it was they who led the people astray. Why does God punish the entire nation as well?

To answer this question, we must return once again to an overall theme in Chumash that we have discussed in our shiurim on Sefer Shmot (see TSC shiurim on Va'era and Beshalach) and in last week's shiur on Parshat Bhaalotcha.

THE LAST STRAW

One could suggest that the people's preference of adopting the conclusion of the meraglim reflected their own spiritual weakness as well. Undoubtedly, the slanted report presented by the meraglim had influenced their decision. However, since the time of the Exodus and throughout their desert journey, the people had consistently shown a lack of idealism. (Review once again Yechezkel 20:1-11 and our shiur on Parshat Va'era.)

Had the Land of Israel been offered to them on a silver platter, Bnei Yisrael most likely would have been delighted to accept it. However, once they realize that conquering the Promised Land requires commitment and dedication, the nation declines. This entire incident only strengthened God's earlier conclusion that Bnei Yisrael were not yet capable of fulfilling their destiny.

To support this point, note how the Torah describes God's decision to punish the nation in both 14:11-12 and 14:21-24:
"And God spoke to Moshe - 'ad ana y'naatzuni ha'am ha'zeh...' - How long will this people continue to defy Me, and how long will they have no faith in Me, despite all the signs (miracles) that I performed in their midst..." (14:11-13)

And several psukim later:

"For all those men who saw My Glory and My signs in Egypt and in the desert, and they have tested my TEN TIMES, yet they did not listen to My voice. If they will see the land that I promised to their forefathers... [However] My servant Kalev will see the land, for he had a different spirit..." (see 14:21-24, read carefully)

Clearly, Bnei Yisrael's punishment is not based solely on this specific sin of the meraglim, but rather on their overall behavior since the time they left Egypt.

This also explains the obvious parallel between Moshe's prayer in the aftermath of this event and his prayer in the aftermath of "chet ha'egel". Then as well, God wished to destroy the entire nation, opting to make a nation out of Moshe instead; but Moshe petitioned God to invoke His "midot ha'rachamim" (attributes of mercy). This time as well, Moshe beseeches God in a similar manner; however the sin of the "meraglim" was more severe, and hence it is impossible to reverse the "gzar din" (verdict). Instead, it could only be delayed over forty years so not to create a "chillul Hashem".

Due to "chet ha'meraglim", God is convinced that "dor

ha'midbar" would never be capable of meeting the challenges of conquering and establishing a 'holy nation' in the Promised Land. They are to perish slowly in the desert, while a new generation will grow up and become properly educated.

Based on this interpretation, we can explain why God was not willing to accept the repentance of the "ma'apilim" (see 14:39-45). Even though their declaration of: "we are prepared to go up and conquer the place that God has spoken of, FOR WE WERE WRONG" (see 14:40) may reflect a change of heart, it was too late. Had this been Bnei Yisrael's only sin, then most likely their repentance would have sufficed. However, "dor ha'midbar" had suffered from an attitude problem since the time of the Exodus (see Tehilim 95:8-11, Shmot 6:9-12, and Yechezkel 20:5-9).

Even after they received the Torah and built the Mishkan, their continuous complaining was inexcusable. "Chet ha'meraglim" was not an isolated sin; rather it became the 'straw that broke the camel's back'.

Bnei Yisrael may have been more than happy to accept the privileges of becoming an "am segula", yet they were not prepared to accept its responsibilities. God decided that it was necessary to educate a new generation instead.

It is not often in Jewish History when the opportunity arises for Am Yisrael to inherit (or return) to its homeland. The implication of such an opportunity is far greater than simply the fulfillment of "mitzvot yishuv ha'aretz" (the commandment to settle the Land), for it relates to the entire character and destiny of the Jewish people. When such opportunities arise, spiritual weakness should not be allowed to hide behind subjective pessimism. Rather, Jewish leadership must gather strength and assess the realities objectively while rising to the challenges idealistically.

shabbat shalom,
menachem

FOR FURTHER IYUN

1. Note the parallel account of this event in Sefer Dvarim (1:22-24). There, they are called "meraglim" and only the military aspect of their mission is detailed. Relate this to the purpose of Moshe's speech in the 40th year and the fact that Bnei Yisrael are about to cross the Yarden and begin conquest of the Land. See also Ramban (Bamidbar 13:1), note how he attempts to combine both accounts.

2. All said and done, the obvious question remains, why does God command Bnei Yisrael to undertake a mission which may fail?

One could suggest that even though God has promised the land to Bnei Yisrael, He prefers that its conquest follows a natural sequence of events. Even though Yisrael enjoyed a supernatural existence in the desert, as they prepare for entering the land, they must begin to behave in a natural manner, as this will be the mode of life once they conquer the land. Now there is value in the fact that Bnei Yisrael participate actively in the process of "kibush ha'aretz", and begin to live like any normal nation by making decisions on their own.

This could be compared to a 'first step' towards national maturity. Just like a child's needs are first taken care of by his parents, and slowly he must begin to take on his own responsibilities, so too Bnei Yisrael at this stage. Unfortunately, it seems that this 'weaning' process began a bit too soon. Bnei Yisrael were as yet not ready.

3. Recall from last week's shiur that in the overall structure of Sefer Bamidbar, parshiot of mitzvot which would appear to belong in Sefer Vayikra often 'interrupt' the ongoing narrative 'challenging' us to find a connection. Review the mitzvot in 15:1-41 and try to find a thematic connection to the story of the meraglim.

1) The mitzvah of "minchat n'sachim" to be brought with korbanot Olah or Shlamim;

- 2) The mitzvah of taking challah;
Note that both these mitzvot begin with the phrase "ki tavou el ha'aretz" (when you come in the Land);
- 3) Avodah Zara of the tzibur and the necessary korban chatat (should entire nation sin);
- 4) Chilul Shabbat and its punishment;
- 5) Mitzvat Tzizit

- a. Attempt to relate these parshiot to chet ha'meraglim?
(Compare both thematically and linguistically.)
- b. Where in Sefer Vayikra does each mitzvah belong?
- c. Recall the various mitzvot which chazal equate with keeping the entire Torah:
 - 1) Eretz Yisrael
 - 2) Avodah Zarah
 - 3) Shabbat
 - 4) Tzizit

Could you conclude that Chazal based these Midrashim on the special structure of Sefer Bamidbar?

4. Note 15:22-23. Why is this pasuk referring to the transgression of all the mitzvot of Torah, while the chazal explain that it refers specifically to avoda zarah.

(Relate your answer to the previous question.)

How is chet ha'meraglim thematically similar?