

Parashat Shelach Lecha 5776, 2016:

Of Spies and the Promised Land

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, David ben Elazar Yehoshua, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, Leah bat Shifra and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* begins with the following three *pasukim* (verses):

The L-rd spoke to Moses saying: “Send out for yourself men who will scout the Land of Canaan, which I am giving to the children of Israel. You shall send one man each for his father’s tribe; each one shall be a chieftain in their midst.” So Moses sent them from the desert of Paran by the word of the L-rd. All of them were men of distinction; they were the heads of the children of Israel. (*Sefer Bamidbar* 13:1-3, these and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

In some ways, these verses are rather mystifying, since we are at a loss as to why Hashem gave Moses this command. After all, the final verse of the previous *parasha* does not provide us with a context for our *pasukim*, except in regards to the physical location of the Jewish people at this moment in time: “Then the people departed from Hazeroth, and they camped in the desert of Paran.” (*Sefer Bamidbar*, 12:16) While we usually learn the “story behind the story” through various Midrashim, in this case, *Sefer Devarim* fills in the gap in our narrative:

And I [Moses] said to you, “You have come to the mountain of the Amorites, which the L-rd, our G-d, is giving us. Behold, the L-rd, your G-d, has set the land before you; go up and possess it, as the L-rd, G-d of your fathers has spoken to you; you shall neither fear nor be dismayed.” And all of you [i.e. the Jewish people] approached me and said, “Let us send men ahead of us so that they will search out the land for us and bring us back word by which route we shall go up, and to which cities we shall come.” And the matter pleased me; so I took twelve men from you, one man for each tribe. (1:20-23, brackets my own)

In order to more deeply understand how the passages from *Sefer Bamidbar* and *Sefer Devarim* dove-tail, we need to imagine how they could be combined: “And the matter pleased me; [and I – Moses - brought it before Hashem who acceded to my request and said to me,] ‘Send out for yourself men who will scout the Land of Canaan, which I am giving to the children of Israel. You shall send one man each for his father’s tribe; each one shall be a chieftain in their midst.’ So I took twelve men from you, one man for each tribe.” At this juncture, we have a much better idea as to what likely took place in the interchange between Hashem and Moses prior to the sending forth of the scouts.

There remains one crucial issue: Why did the people and Moses need a reconnaissance mission to search out the land? This question is particularly apropos, since, on numerous occasions, the Almighty had declared the Land of Israel to be “a land flowing with milk and honey” – i.e. perfect in every way. (*Sefer Shemot* 3:8, 17, 13: 5, 32:3, etc.) This notion lends strong support to Rashi’s (1040-1105) famous explanation of the first words in *Sefer Bamidbar* 13:2: **Send for yourself**: “According to your own understanding. I am not commanding you, but if you wish, you may send.” Rabbi Shmuel Halevi Eidels *zatza*l (1555-1631), known by his Hebrew acronym as the “Maharsha,” builds upon Rashi’s interpretation by noting that Moses’ desire to listen to the Jewish people and send out scouts was actually in opposition to Hashem’s position:

This was not the view of the Holy One who had already testified that the Land was good; therefore, the people should have believed Him in this matter. The following statement concerning a [discerning] person metaphorically represents this idea: “Would a person purposely choose a bad portion for himself? [Certainly not!] – All the more so did the Creator [refrain from choosing a poor piece of land] when He selected the Land of Israel [as His special dwelling place and as the land for His chosen people]! ... (*Chidushei Aggadot, Masechet Sotah* 34b, this, and the following translations, brackets and bolding my own)

Next, the Maharsha notes an additional problem that had been previously addressed by the Ramban (Nachmanides, 1194-1270): “Since it was also Moses’ desire [and not just the request of the people] to send forth the scouts, in what way did the people sin more than he?” After all, Moses had said: “And the matter [to send forth scouts] pleased me.” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 1:23, brackets my own) The Maharsha summarizes the most salient points of the Ramban’s highly complex response to our question in the following fashion:

Even in the wars that were fought with the guarantee of Hashem’s salvation, the Jewish people relied upon normative strategies. As the text states, “A steed is prepared for a day of battle, but the victory is the L-rd’s.” (*Sefer Mishle* 21:31) The Holy One agreed to such actions as scouting out the terrain, even though He had assured the Jewish people of undeniable victory. This was the case, for example, when Joshua sent forth two *tzadikim* (righteous individuals) who would never malign the integrity of the Land, namely, Caleb and Phineas, prior to conquering *Eretz Yisrael*. Moreover, the only reason they were sent was to ascertain the most advantageous points of attack in their war of indisputable victory.

[At this juncture we encounter a vital difference between the actions of Joshua and Moses.] In our *parasha*, Hashem agreed to Moses’ request to send forth men to explore *Eretz Yisrael*. Moses, however, was unaware that the number and type of men should have been limited to **two** individuals on the level of righteousness of Caleb and Phineas. As the Torah states, the Holy One told Moses, “Send for yourself men...” – i.e. the smallest number of “men,” being no less two, whose task was not to determine whether or not victory was possible, but rather to find the easiest pathways to the promised triumph. Unfortunately, the Jewish people had a decidedly different intention than the Holy One and Moses. The people demonstrated a fundamental lack of faith in Hashem’s promises, since they demanded empirical proof as to whether the land was “good or bad.” Moses, however, was completely unaware of the true basis for the people’s request to send forth scouts, which is why the Torah states: “And the matter [to send forth scouts] pleased me.”

According to the Maharsha’s explanation of our verse, “Send out for yourself men who will scout the Land of Canaan, which I am giving to the children of Israel,” in conjunction with the commentaries of Rashi and the Ramban, we now have a more comprehensive picture of its context and meaning: “Send out for yourself, according to your own understanding, men who will scout the Land of Canaan, since you [Moshe] are unaware of the people’s evil intention and of My [true] understanding and knowledge in

this matter...”

In sum, the people’s intention from the very beginning was to send out **spies**, since they questioned the veracity of Hashem’s promise that they would inherit *Eretz Yisrael*. This revealed a singular *chisaron emunah* (lack of faith), as it was Hashem, and no other, who had taken them out of Egypt, fed them manna in the wilderness, split the Sea of Reeds, given them the Torah and performed countless other wonders and miracles. In stark contrast, Hashem and Moses sought to send out **scouts** who would lead the way to certain victory in the Promised Land.

With Hashem’s help, may we grow in our *emunah* (faith) as we strive to emulate Caleb, Phineas, Joshua and Moses. Moreover, may we continue to merit Hashem’s guidance, and live to see the universal recognition of *Zechariah*’s famous phrase: “Not by military force and not by physical strength, but by My spirit, says the L-rd of Hosts.” (4:6) May this time come soon and in our days. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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They may also be found on YUTorah.org using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha’s name.

The email list, *b’chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

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