

Parashat Shelach Lecha 5782, 2022:

To Be a Scout or a Spy

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, Shayndel bat Mordechai Yehudah, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The namesake of our *parasha* is found in its second verse: “Send out for yourself (*shelach lecha*) 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.” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 13:2, this and all Tanach and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) In his *Commentary on the Torah*, Rashi (1040-1105) asks the following celebrated question based upon *Midrash Tanchuma*, Parashat Shelach Lecha 5: “Why is the section dealing with the spies (*meraglim*) juxtaposed with the section dealing with Miriam?” and answers: “Because she [Miriam] was punished over matters of slander (*iskei dibbah*), for speaking against her brother, and these wicked people [that is, the spies] witnessed [it], but did not learn their lesson.” Herein, Rashi suggests that just like Miriam spoke slanderously against Moshe and was punished for this act, so, too, should the *meraglim* have known that if they spoke in a degrading manner about *Eretz Canaan* they would be punished.

Most readers take Rashi’s answer at face value, that both Miriam and the *meraglim* engaged in speaking *iskei dibbah* and were punished for their actions; therefore, the narrative of the spies follows Miriam’s ignominious story. Yet, we are left wondering how Miriam and the *meraglim* could have erred so grievously. My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-

1993), known as the “Rav” by his students and followers, addresses this concern in his novel interpretation (*chiddush*) of the above-cited passage from *Midrash Tanchuma*:

[What lesson should the spies have taken from Miriam?] It was not the lesson of *lashon hara*, of not engaging in slander. Miriam had overlooked the *segullah* [chosen and unique] element in Moses, and they overlooked the *segullah* element in the land. Miriam ignored the chosenness of her brother Moses, his numinous character and charisma. The spies, likewise, could not grasp the secret of a *segullah* land and its unique metaphysical relationship to the people. There was a common denominator in the two episodes, in her protest against Moses and in their report submitted to Moses. The element of *segullah* was absent from both. (*Vision and Leadership: Reflections on Joseph and Moses*, David Shatz, Joel B. Wolowelsky, and Reuven Ziegler editors, page 186, brackets and underlining my own)

The Rav further expands the concept of *segullah* when he contrasts Moshe’s perception of *Eretz Canaan* with that of the *meraglim*:

Moses regarded the land not only in a political or physical light, but also as an exalted everlasting union. A singular *segullah* people, special to God, was being joined to a singular land, from which God’s attention is never withdrawn. Destinies were being joined... Moses expected the scouts to note the *segullah* singularity of the land, to perceive its worthiness in terms of Abraham’s covenant with God.

Sadly, the *meraglim* represented the polar opposite of Moshe’s perspective:

They explored the area from the desert of Zin to Rehob, leading to Hamath, but they viewed the land as one would appraise property. Their report was that of spies, not that of scouts; they balanced debits against credits and declared the entire enterprise hopeless. With grandeur looking down on them, all they could see was the mundane. (*Reflections of the Rav: Lessons in Jewish Thought*, Vol. I, Rabbi Abraham R. Besdin ed., pages 122-123, underlining my own)

As I write these words, many among us are, once again, challenged in their perception of *Medinat Yisrael*. A great number of Jews today believe that Israel is just another country, a political entity and nothing more. In my view, this is a continuation of the *meraglim* mentality that, according to *Chazal*, is inextricably connected to Tisha b’Av, the destruction of the two Holy Temples, and the seemingly never-ending period of *Galut*. In contrast, I believe the proper response to the miracle of *Medinat Yisrael* can be found in the stirring words of Yehoshua and Kalev, the two true scouts in the midst of the *meraglim*, who were the sole individuals to recognize the *segullah* nature of the Land: “They spoke to the entire congregation of the children of Israel, saying, ‘The land we passed

through to scout is an exceedingly good land. If Hashem desires us, He will bring us to this land and give it to us, a land flowing with milk and honey.” (14:7-8)

May the time come soon, and in our day, when, like Yehoshua and Kalev, our entire people will recognize the *segullah* qualities of *Eretz Yisrael*; and may we be *zocheh* to behold the complete fulfillment of *kibbutz galuyot*: “Sound the great shofar of our freedom, raise the banner to gather our exiles and gather us together from the four corners of the earth. Blessed are You, Hashem, Who gathers in the dispersed of His people Israel.” (Translation, *The Complete ArtScroll Siddur*)
V'chane yihi ratzon.

Shabbat Shalom

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Please contact me at rdb718@gmail.com to be added to my weekly email list.

*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah*, *Tanach* may be found at:
<http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of Rabbi Soloveitchik's English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link: [The Rav](#)