

PARASHAT SH'LACH



כשלון המרגלים The Spies' Failure

■ Divine Process or Human Initiative?

The sad fate of the Jewish people in the desert is sealed shut in Parashat Sh'lach. The generation that left Egypt amid great miracles and amazing wonders is told that it will not enter the Promised Land, and though Bnei Yisrael protest and weep, they come to realize that the decree is final.

The reason? The Sin of the Spies. Of the twelve leading members of the nation who were sent to scout out the Land, ten of them returned with a negative and discouraging report. The nation not only believed them, but began to complain and protest against being brought to Eretz Yisrael.

What led to this shameful failure? How could the idea to send great leaders of Israel, commanded directly by G-d, end so catastrophically?

And even if the scouts sinned, why was Moshe punished on their account? What did he do wrong? In his parting speech to the Nation, Moshe states:

גַּם בֵּי הַתְּאֲנֻף ה' בְּגִלְלַתְכֶם יֵאמֹר, גַּם אֶתְּה לֹא תָבֵא שָׁמָּה.
יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן נֹון הָעֵימָד לְפָנָיִךְ הוּא יָבֵא שָׁמָּה...

Hashem also became angered at me [at that time] because of you, saying, "You too will not enter [the Land]; Yehoshua bin Nun, standing before you, he will enter the Land..." (D'varim 1,37-38)

In attempting to answer these questions, we also encounter what seems to be a blatant contradiction in the Torah concerning whose idea it was to send the scouts. Parashat Sh'lach appears to make it clear that it was Hashem's idea:

וַיִּדְבֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: שְׁלַח לְךָ אַנְשִׁים וַיֵּתְרוּ אֶת אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן...

G-d said to Moshe: Send men for you

and they will scout out the land of Canaan... (Bamidbar 13,1-2)

And to dispel any doubt on this score, we read two verses later that “*Moshe sent them from Paran Wilderness, in accordance with G-d's dictum.*” This last phrase is a clear indication of G-d's command, as we read many times in Parashat Behaalot'cha (for instance, 9,18).

Yet in Moshe's parting speech at the beginning of D'varim, he declares that sending the scouts was the nation's initiative:

וַתִּקְרְבוּן אֵלַי בְּלָכֶם וַתֹּאמְרוּ נְשַׁלְחָה אַנְשִׁים לְפָנֵינוּ

וַיַּחְפְּרוּ לָנוּ אֶת הָאָרֶץ וַיָּשִׁבוּ אֵתְנוּ דְבַר אֶת הַדֶּרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר נָעַלְהָ בָּהּ...

And you all approached me and you said:

Let us send men before us, they will survey the land and report

to us by which route we should go up ... (D'varim 1,22)

Moshe Rabbeinu then adds that he agreed to the idea, seeing in it no sign of lack of faith in G-d: “*And the idea found favor in my eyes.*” (verse 23)

So which was it: the people's idea, or a Divine command? If the former, the failure of the mission might be easier to grasp, but in any event, how do we explain the contradiction in the two accounts? It is true that Rashi explains consistently that G-d merely “agreed” to have a delegation of scouts, without actually commanding it; but this is hard to reconcile with the plain meaning of the text.

■ **Moshe, “Trusted Throughout G-d's House”**

When we approach this question, we must posit the following axiom: Moshe Rabbeinu was chosen by G-d to bring His word and His message to Israel, and to ensure that the nation carries out G-d's commands in both spirit and letter.

The Torah attests to Moshe's utter loyalty to Hashem: “*Throughout My house he is trusted*” (Bamidbar 12,7). Hashem therefore granted Moshe the

authority to choose the timing and manner in which to bring the Divine word to Bnei Yisrael.

One of the clearest examples is that of the Sabbath and the *manna*. Though Hashem commanded the details of both at the same time, Moshe chose to issue the command regarding the *manna* without mentioning the Sabbath day. Only after the sixth day came around, when Bnei Yisrael were surprised to find that the *manna* they had collected had miraculously doubled, did Moshe ceremoniously explain: *“This is that which G-d spoke: Tomorrow will be a Sabbath of Sabbaths to G-d”* (Sh'mot 16,23). That is to say, “Hashem told me this beforehand, but I waited until you were able to begin experiencing the arrival of the special Sabbath flavor before informing you of the laws concerning that day.” In this manner, Moshe understood, the commandments would not just be a set of restrictions, but would rather be sweet and pleasant for them.

Many years earlier, Moshe learned the hard way the importance of ensuring that Israel was ready to hear the entirety of G-d's message. When he first came to them and related the Divine message he had received – that they were to be freed from Egyptian bondage and become G-d's nation – the people did not accept it:

וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה בֵּן אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל,
וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֶל מֹשֶׁה מִקְצֹר רוּחַ וּמִעֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה.

*Moshe told the Children of Israel the message,
but they did not pay him heed
because of their broken spirit and hard work.* (Sh'mot 6,9)

Israel's apathetic rebuff taught Moshe that, among his other functions, he must find the proper approach by which to relay G-d's word, so that it will actually be accepted. As we read at the end of the Torah:

זֹאת הַתּוֹרָה אֲשֶׁר שָׂם מֹשֶׁה לִפְנֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.
*This is the Torah that Moshe placed before
the Children of Israel.* (D'varim 4,44)

It does not say he “taught” the Torah, but rather that he knew how to “place” the Torah before Israel, in a way that would guarantee that the nation would accept and carry out G-d's command.

In light of this, we can now understand what happened with the sending of the spies.

■ Before You, or With You?

The verses show us a very basic difference between the manner in which Hashem led Israel during the time of the Exodus, and the way He led them decades later during the conquest of the Land of Israel.

Leaving Egypt, the Israelites were totally passive. Standing scared at the Red Sea, they were told by Moshe: *“Hashem will fight for you; you remain silent”* (Sh'mot 14,14). But when they entered the Land, 40 years later, they proactively fought wars against the occupants of the Land, albeit at G-d's direct command and with His help from the side: *“Watch, I have given Sichon, Emorite King of Heshbon and his land into your hands. Begin inheriting! Provoke him into war!”* (D'varim 2,24)

We also see this distinction when we look at the story of the Holy Ark. Throughout Israel's four decades in the wilderness, the Ark traveled in front of them. Its function was to remove all obstacles in their path, and to choose the easiest and safest route for Israel to travel:

וְאָרוֹן בְּרִית ה' נִסַּע לִפְנֵיהֶם דְּרֹךְ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים לְתוֹר לָהֶם מְנוּחָה.
*The Ark of G-d's Covenant traveled three days ahead of them
 to scout out a place for them to settle.* (Bamidbar 10,33)

The Ark traveled before them to “scout out” the land; why, then, did Hashem command Moshe to send scouts to do the same job? The same word is even used:

וַיִּשְׁלַח אֹתָם מֹשֶׁה לְתוֹר אֶת אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן...
Moshe send them to scout out the land of Canaan (13,17)

Could not the Ark do it better? Was the Ark about to stop its work, no longer to travel before the people, that it needed men to replace it?

A one-word change between what happened in the desert and that which was to occur in the Land of Israel provides the answer. In his parting words of rebuke, Moshe told Bnei Yisrael that Hashem walked לפניכם, *“before you”* (D'varim 1,30 and 33). Hashem fought for us in the desert; we were passive. But later on, we read that when Bnei Yisrael will go to war in Eretz Yisrael, the High Priest will encourage them with different words: *“For Hashem your G-d Who walks עִמָּכֶם, with you to fight for you, against your enemies, to save you...”* (20,4)

In the desert, G-d walked *before* us – and in the Land of Israel, He walks *with* us! It is as we said: After the Exodus, Hashem walked before the camp

of Israel, waging their wars and clearing their way. But in Eretz Yisrael, the people themselves wage the war, while Hashem is *with* them, providing help from the side.

This is precisely what Moshe told his student and successor, Yehoshua bin Nun, when he passed him the reins of leadership:

וְהָיָה הַהֲלֹךְ לְפָנֶיךָ הוּא יְהִי עִמָּךְ לֹא יִרְפֶּךָ וְלֹא יַעֲזֹבֶךָ...
*Hashem Who walks before you, He will be with you;
 He will not fail you and will not leave you...* (D'varim 31,8)

– meaning that Hashem Who walks *before* you today in the desert, will be *with* you in your wars in the Land of Israel. This difference does not stem from the geographical location – inside or outside the Land – but rather from the nature of Israel's transformation from a people of slaves to a free and independent nation. Just like parents intervene progressively less in their child's life as he grows more mature and independent, so too did Hashem first then grant great miracles, and later encouraged them from the side as they became independent and waged their own wars.

Of course, when Israel is unable to succeed on its own, such as against the impenetrable walls of Jericho, Hashem helps out with miracles (as recounted in Joshua 6). This is what Moshe means when he says:

ה' אֵלֵי־לְהִיבְכֶם הַהֲלֹךְ לְפָנֵיכֶם הוּא יִלָּחֵם לְכֶם כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה אֶתְכֶם
 בְּמִצְרַיִם לְעֵינֵיכֶם.
*Hashem your G-d Who walks before you, He will fight for you,
 as he did in Egypt before your eyes.* (D'varim 1,30)

That is, when Israel does not have the necessary tools with which to fight the enemy, the outstretched Divine arm will appear and do the work for them.

How does this apply to the spies? In the second year after the Exodus, Hashem commands Moshe Rabbeinu to send men to scout out the Land, as stated clearly in the beginning of Parashat Sh'lach. Moshe understands that the time has come for Israel to inherit the Land via war – and that it is up to him to find the best way to do so. He first seeks to imbue the nation with a new, proactive attitude, encouraging them to turn the Divine command into their own desire and initiative. He hopes to have Israel think and plan war tactics on their own, so that they will fight successfully and inherit the Promised Land.

Nearly four decades later, when Moshe delivers his parting speech to Israel, he tells them what happened behind the scenes before the Spies were dispatched:

וַנְּסַע מִחֶרֶב... וַנָּבֵא עַד קָדֵשׁ בְּרִנְעַי. וְאָמַר אֲלֵכֶם בְּאַתֶּם עַד הַר הָאֱמֹרִי...

We traveled from Horev... and arrived in Kadesh Barne'a.

I said to you there, "You have arrived at the mountain of the Emorites that Hashem has given us." (D'varim 1,19-20)

That is, upon their quick arrival at the Emorite border, the time has come to conquer Eretz Yisrael from the Seven Nations, as Moshe continues:

רְאֵה נָתַן ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְפָנֶיךָ אֶת הָאָרֶץ,

עֲלֵה רֵשׁ כְּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר ה' אֱלֹהֵי אֲבֹתֶיךָ לְךָ, אַל תִּירָא וְאַל תַּחַת.

See, Hashem has given you the land; go up and inherit it,

as Hashem the Lord of your fathers told you; do not fear. (verse 21)

Why does Moshe say “*as Hashem told you*”? Where do we find that G-d gave such a command? The answer is the verse we quoted above from the beginning of Sh'lach: “*G-d said to Moshe: Send men for you and they will scout out the land of Canaan*” (Bamidbar 13,1-2). With the words “*go up and inherit it,*” Moshe is encouraging Israel to actively prepare to fight and win Eretz Yisrael. And in fact, the nation internalized the message and realized it was time to “change gears” and take an active role – such as by sending out scouts:

וַתִּקְרְבוּן אֵלַי כְּלַכֶּם וַתֹּאמְרוּ: נִשְׁלַחָה אַנְשִׁים לְפָנֵינוּ וְנִחְפְּרוּ לָנוּ אֶת הָאָרֶץ וַיֵּשְׁבוּ אֵתְנוּ דָבָר, אֶת הַדֶּרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר נֵעֲלָה בָּהּ וְאֵת הָעָרִים אֲשֶׁר נָבֵא אֱלֹהֵינוּ.

And you all gathered to me and said:

“Let us send men before us and they will scout out the land and bring us a report – the path we should take and the cities we should conquer.”

וַיֵּיטֵב בְּעֵינַי הַדָּבָר...

And it was good in my eyes... (verses 22-23)

Moshe thus succeeded in leading the Nation along the process that Hashem commanded.

■ The Add-On that Led to Failure

As mentioned above, the same root - *taturu/latur*, “to scout out” - is used both in reference to the Holy Ark as it “scouted out” the desert for Israel,

and to the spies sent to “scout out” the Promised Land. Both refer to the search for effective paths for advancement and attack. Just like the Ark did not perform an undercover espionage mission, so too, the twelve scouts were not assigned to check out the land or the people living there; their mission was to find the right ways to approach the Land.

Support for this point is that the scouts chosen for this mission were famous tribal leaders, and not anonymous people of the type usually sent on secret missions. Hashem wanted specifically the leaders to do the work of the Ark: each one was to find and choose the most appropriate way for his tribe to go up to the Land of Israel, whether by mountain, valley, plain, or desert. This is precisely the information that Bnei Yisrael asked them to ascertain: *“the path we should take and the cities we should conquer.”* (D'varim 1,22)

When Moshe saw that the people agreed to the mission, he thought that this would also be a good opportunity to enthuse them regarding the special qualities of the land they were about to enter. His idea was to bring live evidence of the great abundance and the large size of the crops growing there. Moshe also knew that there were giants in the Land of Israel, and he even told Israel about them himself:

שִׁמְעוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶתְּהָ עֵבֶר הַיּוֹם אֵת הַיַּרְדֵּן לְבָא לְרִשְׁתָּ גּוֹיִם גְּדֹלִים וְעֲצָמִים...
עַם גְּדוֹל וָרִם בְּנֵי עֲנָקִים...

*Hear O Israel, you are crossing over the Jordan today,
coming to inherit strong and powerful nations... a large and
strong nation, sons of giants...* (D'varim 9,1-2)

Moshe saw no reason to hide this from Israel; on the contrary, he saw it as a great opportunity to show them the value and potential of the Land of Israel, and that they, too, could expect to develop into a strong nation there. In this vein, Moshe added other assignments to the scouts' mandate:

וּרְאִיתֶם אֶת הָאָרֶץ מֵהָ הוּא וְאֵת הָעָם הַיֹּשֵׁב עָלֶיהָ,
הַחֲזֵק הוּא הַרְפָּה הַמְעַט הוּא אִם רַב.

*And you shall see what kind of land it is, and the people living
upon it, whether they are strong or weak, few or many.* (Bamidbar 13,18)

Moshe thus expanded G-d's original command beyond what the People of Israel asked, in order to enhance their motivation to arise and inherit the Land of Israel. He thought that this could be included in G-d's command to have the spies *“scout out the land.”*

But he was mistaken: The People of Israel were not on as high a level of *bitachon*, trust in Hashem, as he thought.

What happened as a result of the extra assignment that Moshe gave the scouts? They returned and confirmed that the Land was not only “*flowing with milk and honey*” (13,27), but also was unfortunately occupied by a strong nation, with fortified cities and sons of giants. This report was well within the mandate given them by Moshe, but their very fateful and grave conclusion was not:

... לא נוכל לעלות אל העם כי חזק הוא ממנו.
*... we will not be able to overtake the nation there,
 for they are stronger than we are.* (13,31)

This, of course, set the stage for the “weeping for generations” in which the people lost heart and refused to enter the Land. And this bitter failure stemmed indirectly from the fact that Moshe gave extra assignments to the scouts - tasks that were not in their original mandate. We now see why Moshe shared in the punishment for this sad incident (as we saw above in D'varim 1,37-38). He mistakenly thought the people were on a higher level of faith than they actually were, and discovered only afterwards what they were missing:

ובדבר הזה אינכם מאמינים בה' אלהיכם,
 ההלך לפניכם בדדך לתור לכם מקום לחנותכם...
 לראתכם בדדך אשר תלכו בה...
*And in this thing you do not have faith in Hashem your G-d:
 He Who walks before you on the way,
 to scout out a place for you to camp... to show you
 the path on which you should walk.* (D'varim 1,32-33)

Moshe couldn't understand: “How could you think that Hashem, Who has cared for you so deeply all this time, would suddenly abandon you?” With great pain, Moshe precisely points out the missing link: national faith.

■ Another Chance

But there was yet another problematic aspect to Moshe's behavior during this incident. When the Children of Israel heard the Spies' report and cried, “*Let us return to Egypt,*” the leaders responded with despair:

וַיִּפֹּל מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן עַל פְּנֵיהֶם לְפָנֵי כָּל קְהַל עֵדֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.
*Moshe and Aharon fell on their faces before the entire
 congregation of the Children of Israel.* (Bamidbar 14,4-5)

Only Yehoshua and Calev dared to stand up to the masses of people with boldness and faith: “G-d is with us, do not fear them” (verse 9). The response of Moshe and Aharon, compared with that of Yehoshua and Calev, gave the impression of helplessness. For this, they were punished and not allowed to enter the Land of Israel.

However, G-d wished to give Moshe and Aharon another chance before finalizing the decree. The opportunity arose 38 years later, when the nation again complained ungratefully, demanding water. Unfortunately, once again Moshe and Aharon did not respond with strength: “*Moshe and Aharon came before the congregation ... and they fell on their faces*” (20,6). They again retreated, instead of standing courageously and reminding them how G-d had stood by their side for four decades. They could have sanctified G-d's Name and rectified their error following the spies' negative report.

This failure to respond bravely for a second time explains Hashem's severe reaction at the end of the Book of D'varim:

וּמַת בְּהָר... עַל אֲשֶׁר מְעַלְתֶּם בִּי ...
 עַל אֲשֶׁר לֹא קִדְשַׁתֶּם אוֹתִי בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.
*And die here upon this mountain... for having broken faith
 with Me... for not having sanctified Me among
 the Children of Israel.* (D'varim 32,50-51)

When we read these verses on their own, it is not clear why G-d uses such strong language and makes such sharp accusations against them. But we now understand that what Moshe and Aharon did here, for a second time, arouses the memory of the first time – the Sin of the Spies. Twice they did not stand up with pride to sanctify G-d's Name. The punishment that had been suspended 38 years ago will now be activated:

לָכֵן לֹא תָבִיאוּ אֶת הַקְּהָל הַזֶּה אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נָתַתִּי לָהֶם.
*You will therefore not bring this congregation
 to the Land.* (Bamidbar 20,12)

■ **Calev and Yehoshua**

When Hashem informs Moshe of the heavy punishment decreed upon the generation of the desert – that they would die there, and only their children would be allowed to enter the Land – He tells him of one exception:

וְעַבְדִּי כָלֵב, עֵקֶב הָיְתָה רוּחַ אַחֲרֵת עִמּוֹ וַיִּמְלֵא אַחֲרָי,
וְהִבִּיאֲתִיו אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר בָּא שָׁמָּה וְזָרְעוּ יוֹרְשֶׁנָּה.

My servant Calev, for having a different spirit and for having followed Me, I will bring him into the Land to which he went, and his descendants will inherit it. (14,24)

But why only Calev? Yehoshua bin Nun also stood up bravely to the other ten spies! Yehoshua, too, demanded that Israel show loyalty and faith and agree to enter the Land of Israel. Why, then, did G-d not say that he would also be allowed to enter?

Interestingly, in the next prophecy, Yehoshua's name *is* mentioned:

אִם אַתֶּם תָּבֹאוּ אֶל הָאָרֶץ ... כִּי אִם כָּלֵב בֶּן יִפְנֶה וַיְהוֹשִׁעַ בֶּן נֹון.

You [Moshe and Aharon] will not come to the Land... only Calev ben Yefuneh and Yehoshua bin Nun. (verse 30)

Why did G-d mention only Calev at first, and then afterwards mention Yehoshua together with Calev?

Later on, in the first chapter of D'varim, when Moshe repeats the story over to Bnei Yisrael before his death, the same difference appears. In verse 36, Moshe says that Hashem was angered at the sin and that only Calev would be privileged to enter the Land. But in verse 38, Moshe says that G-d was angered at him [Moshe] as well, and that he could not enter, and that Yehoshua *would* be permitted to enter.

Comparing these verses tells us that Yehoshua is mentioned only in the context of Moshe's *not* entering. This is the key.

By mentioning only Calev at first, even though we know that he is not the only one who will enter the Land, Hashem is hinting that this is not the final decree: Others will also be allowed to enter, such as Yehoshua – and possibly even Moshe and Aharon, if they take advantage of the opportunity to correct their error!

But when Hashem then says that only Calev *and* Yehoshua will be allowed to enter, He is saying that the list of those permitted to enter is now final!

Moshe and Aharon have not rectified their mistake, and they will not be included on the final list. Only Calev and Yehoshua can enter the Land, and no one else.

This teaches us much about Hashem's ways: He often gives us more than one chance – but if the opportunity is squandered, He issues a punishment for the second sin that covers the first one as well. The punishment, originally “suspended,” is then liable to be activated in a manner that appears more severe than expected – because it is rooted in a previous grave sin.

Looking backwards, it could be that if Moshe Rabbeinu had acted differently, we would have merited that he himself would have entered Eretz Yisrael:

1. If he would have made it clear to Bnei Yisrael that it was G-d's command to send scouts.
2. If he would have limited the scouts' mandate to simply looking for the best routes for entry into the Land.
3. If we would have not fallen silently on his face, but rather stood up boldly and unfurled the banner of faith in G-d.

Despite these possible mistakes of Moshe, the Torah still describes him with Divine praises that no other mortal ever received:

... עֶבֶד ה' ... וְלֹא קָם נָבִיא עוֹד בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל כְּמֹשֶׁה אֲשֶׁר יָדְעוּ ה' פְּנִים אֶל פְּנִים.

... a servant of G-d... And no prophet ever arose in Israel like Moshe, whom G-d knew face to face. (D'varim 34,5-10)

