

UNDERSTANDING THE SPIES

by Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky

1. Are we G-d's Agents or Do We Act Out of Self-Interest?

The Torah says, "Hashem spoke to Moshe saying, 'Send for yourself men and let them spy out the Land of Canaan that I give to the Children of Israel...'" The "men" that were being sent were people of stature who represented each of the tribes. Rashi explains that at the time that Moshe sent these individuals they were righteous. Only later when they were engaged in spying out the land did they become corrupt. Two of the twelve spies that were sent did not become corrupt. Hoshea Bin Nun, who did not become corrupt, had the letter "yud" added to his name by Moshe Rabbeinu to become Yehoshua. Moshe added the letter "yud" to his name (which represents one of the names of G-d) to indicate that Hashem should come to his aid. Calev, representing the tribe of Yehudah, also did not become corrupt because he went to Hebron to the tomb of the Patriarchs and prayed to Hashem that he should not be ensnared in the plot of the other spies.

The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh asks- if these individuals were all initially righteous and went to scout out the land with Hashem's approval- what caused them to become corrupt? Secondly if Hashem knew this then why did He approve this mission in the first place?

The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh answers with a fundamental principle. When a person represents another individual as his agent he is affected to some degree by the mindset and thoughts of that person. He is acting totally in the capacity of the people who appointed him. Since the motive and intent of Klal Yisroel was to be suspicious and distrustful of Hashem regarding the Promised Land, the spies were impacted by this negative intent. These qualities of the Jewish people, who they were representing, diminished these special people. Although the spies did have free choice (until the very end), their mission became more difficult because of the influence of those who they represented. We see from this that an agent's function is directly linked to the intent of the one who he represents.

The Sfas Emes zt'l asks- if the spies were doomed to fail, then why did Hashem authorize and approve the spying of the land? The Sfas Emes explains that Hashem approved their mission because if they had acted as His agent, then the spiritual quality of their agency would protect them and cause them to see things clearly. However, if their own agenda was primary and Hashem was a mere irrelevancy, then their chance to succeed would be in question. When Hashem authorized their mission He was giving the spies the opportunity to turn their agency into a mitzvah. If the spies

carried out their mission believing that they were agents of Hashem they would not have become corrupted. If on the other hand the spies went into the land representing themselves then they would not merit that special Divine Assistance.

In order for one to be the agent of Hashem one must negate himself and his will to do the Will of Hashem. Since the spies did not do this, they became corrupt. The Sfas Emes continues to say that the same is true for every Jew. The reason why we exist in this world is to carry out the Will of Hashem. When we put on tefillin, observe Shabbos, observe dietary laws etc. we perform in these capacities for the sake of Hashem and not for our own advancement.

We read in the Book of Joshua that Yehoshua Ben Nun (the one who had taken the Jewish people into Canaan) had sent Pinchas and Calev to scout out Jericho. Pinchas and Calev presented themselves as, "Kadorim (peddlers who sell earthenware vessels)." Why did Pinchas and Calev choose to represent themselves as earthenware salesmen? The Sfas Emes explains that the value of a vessel is usually defined by its function as well as the material from which it is made. If a vessel is made of metal and it breaks or can no longer be used, the vessel still retains a degree of value because its metal can be smelted. However, an earthenware vessel, which is made of clay, has value only in its function. Thus if it should break it has no value whatsoever. Pinchas and Calev were identified as Kadorim because they had totally negated themselves to carry out the Will of Hashem. They had no personal motive and were like the earthenware vessel because their total value rested on their function as agents of Hashem. They negated themselves to such a degree that they were able to enter into the inn of Rachov (which was a brothel) without succumbing to temptation.

We must ask ourselves the question - What is our purpose in existence? If the answer is, the purpose of our existence is to do the Will of Hashem, then we are acting as Hashem's agents, thus meriting Divine Assistance. However if we perform mitzvos with an ulterior motive (such as self-interest), we will not merit that same Assistance and thus the effect and value of our actions are diminished.

2. Understanding the Adversity of Our Inclination to Spirituality

The Torah tells us that the Jewish people wanted to spy out the Land of Canaan, despite the fact that Hashem had promised them that it is a bountiful land flowing with milk and honey. The question is - how could the meraglim (the spies) even consider approaching Moshe to ask if they could spy out the land. They knew that he would reject their request because Hashem had already said that it was a bountiful land that flows with milk and honey. The Midrash explains the meraglim could not reveal their true motive to Moshe which was to determine if the land was conquerable or not. Knowing that they would be rebuffed, they made their request under the pretext that they were concerned about a Chilul Hashem (desecration of Hashem's Name).

Their concern was that Hashem promised that the Jewish people would find houses filled with great wealth upon entering the Land of Canaan. Their concern was that the Canaanites would bury their

wealth so that the Jews would not be able to find it, thus causing a Chilul Hashem. Therefore it was an imperative to take the initiative to send spies to locate the hidden wealth, thus causing the Word of Hashem to be fulfilled. When Moshe understood their concern he immediately became blinded, not understanding their true intent. Moshe posed the question to Hashem. Hashem responded by saying, "Send for yourself men..." Meaning, if you feel the need to send spies then I authorize the mission; however from My perspective I have already assured you that the land is filled with blessing. The inference of Hashem's words was that there was a risk factor if Moshe sent spies because the facts could be misconstrued.

Moshe, understanding the possibility of misinterpretation, prayed for his disciple Hoshea Ben Nun and added the letter "yud" to his name to be called Yehoshua. The added letter was to signify that Hashem should protect him from negative influences and all evil. The question is - if Moshe understood the risk of the mission then why did he only pray for Yehoshua? He should have prayed for all of the meraglim. How do we understand this?

The Gemara in Tractate Bava Basra tells us, "The Face of Moshe was like the sun and the face of Yehoshua was like the moon." Moshe Rabbeinu's spiritual dimension was comparable to the sun because just as the sun generates its own energy and light, so too Moshe was a dimension of spirituality on to his own. Yehoshua being the primary disciple of Moshe, was comparable to the moon because his dimension of spirituality was only a reflection of his teacher Moshe. Just as the moon reflects the light of the sun, so too, Yehoshua was a reflection of Moshe's spirituality. None of the other spies were at the same level as Yehoshua. He continuously was learning with Moshe Rabbeinu and never left Moshe's tent. Rashi, in his commentary on Pirkei Avos (Ethics of our Fathers), writes that the reason why the transmission of the Torah was through Yehoshua rather than Aaron or the other disciples of Moshe was because he never left the presence of his rebbe, Moshe. Yehoshua literally lived in the shadow of his rebbe.

The Vilna Gaon zt'l who lived in the eighteenth century was considered equivalent in greatness to the Rambam (Maimonides). Regarding his spirituality, he was depicted by all of the Torah sages of his time as a living angel. The students of the Vilna Gaon zt'l once commented to him, "Rebbe, we wish we would have your yetzer ha'ra (evil inclination)." To this the Vilna Gaon answered, "You would not want my yetzer ha'ra because as the Gemara in Tractate Succah states, 'The greater one is the greater is his yetzer ha'ra.' Why is this the case? If a person's evil inclination does not continue to match his dimension of spiritual growth, then the person would no longer be in a context of making choices. Thus, the person's spiritual accomplishment would no longer have that special value. Since the Vilna Gaon was the equivalent of the Rambam in terms of Torah scholarship and spiritual dimension, then it is understood why his response to his students was that they would not want his yetzer ha'ra.

The Gemara tells us that Abayei had overheard a conversation between a man and women who had made plans to commit adultery deep in the marshes. Abayei followed them secretly and overheard

how the perspective adulterer had a change of heart because he believed that it would be too difficult to maintain the relationship on an ongoing basis. When Abayei saw this man's self control to suppress his desire and not commit adultery he was astounded because he felt that if he were in the same situation he would have succumb to temptation. Abayei realized that an ordinary person could restrain himself and yet he could not. This caused him to become depressed because he realized that he was not at the level he should be. He shared this disappointment with his colleagues. They responded by telling him, "There is nothing to be concerned about; it is only because of your spiritual dimension that your yetzer ha'ra is so overbearing. Therefore you would have succumbed."

With this principle we can understand why Moshe only prayed for Yehoshua not to be affected. Since Yehoshua reflected a semblance of Moshe's spirituality he was the most susceptible to the evil inclination. Moshe added the letter "yud" to Yehoshua's name and prayed for him so that he should be able to overcome his evil inclination.

The Gemara in Tractate Shabbos tells us that if a person truly wishes to advance himself spiritually, Hashem will help him along this journey; on the other hand, if a person wishes to contaminate himself (spiritually) then Hashem will allow him to fall as he chooses to do so.

3. The Value of Trust

The Torah states, "Hashem spoke to Moshe saying, 'Send for yourself men and let them spy out the Land of Canaan that I give to the Children of Israel...'" The Torah could have simply stated, "Send for yourself men and let them spy out the Land of Canaan." Seemingly the part of the verse, "that I give to the Children of Israel..." is superfluous because it is known that the land of Canaan is the Promised Land. What is this part of the verse coming to add?

The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh explains that the Land of Israel (as it was at the time) was in fact impossible to conquer through human efforts because of what the spies had actually witnessed. The spies witnessed giants of extraordinary dimension, cities that were fortified in a way that made them impregnable, and the nations in the land were unconquerable through natural human ability. Because they believed that the conquest of the land was going to be determined only through their own effort, the conquest was impossibility. Therefore they believed that the gift, which was being given to them by Hashem in actuality, was not a gift but a death trap.

The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh explains when the Torah states, "...let them spy out the Land of Canaan that I give..." Hashem is telling them initially that when the spies embark on their mission to spy out the land that the conquest of Canaan is impossibility through human efforts and they will only succeed because "I Hashem am giving the land to the children of Israel." To indicate that is important for them to know that only in this manner (through G-d's intervention) will they be able to conquer the land and not think for one moment that it is through their own efforts. Because if they should consider this even for a moment they will despair and question G-d's true intent. If Hashem told the Jewish people that He is giving them the land then it is obvious that it would be without any

difficulties. The Jews did not perceive it as a gift being given to them "free and clear." They saw the Land of Canaan only as a dwelling place for giants and a location where they would meet their fate. If the Jews had understood and internalized what Hashem had said to them (that He was giving them the Land) they would not have had such a misperception. The question is why did the Jewish people not have the level of trust in Hashem that would have had them perceive the land in accordance with His promise?

The answer is - trust is not merely a concept but rather it is a reality that is sensed. The difficulty is - how could the Jews not have absolute trust in Hashem after being beneficiaries of the revealed miracles in Egypt, the splitting of the Sea, the receiving of the Torah at Sinai, and the daily miracles in the desert? The answer is - that all the good that they had experienced through Hashem's beneficence was problematic to them. How is it possible that after being idolaters in Egypt could they be worthy of such kindness? Especially after Hashem had taken them as His Chosen People, they failed though idol worship with the Golden Calf. The question they asked themselves was - "Why is Hashem treating us like royalty when we are not deserving of such treatment?" Because of their sense of unworthiness the Jewish people could not have absolute trust in Hashem. They believed that ultimately Hashem would destroy them. Because of their lack of trust in Hashem, they saw their entry into the Land of Canaan as a ploy to bring the Jews to their death.

The new generation that survived the forty-year trek (anyone less than the age of twenty at the time of the sin of the spies) could have also perceived the demise of the previous generation as a proof Hashem to ultimately lead them all to their destruction. All of these misperceptions are based on a lack of trust. When circumstances become incomprehensible do we suppress our own difficulties and trust Hashem or do we fall prey to our difficulties which have no resolution?

Throughout history the Jewish people have only survived because of their trust and faith in Hashem. The fate of the Jew and his survival has always been difficult to comprehend. If we would focus on the statistics and circumstances that the Jews have been subjected to, there should not be a Jewish people. It is only because of the Jew's trust in Hashem that circumstance and statistics have no relevance whatsoever.

The reason why the spies reported that the Land was unconquerable and the Jews believed this information as fact was because they did trust Hashem. If Calev had not prostrated himself on the tomb of the Patriarchs and ask for Divine Assistance to help him perceive the situation correctly or if Moshe did not add the letter "yud" to Yehoshua's name they too would have failed despite their spiritual level.

If a person feels that he could not earn a living unless he works on Shabbos, then he is demonstrating a lack of faith and trust in Hashem because the Talmud tells us that one's livelihood is determined by Hashem on Rosh Hashanah for the entire year until the following Rosh Hashanah. With this issue as well as all other aspects of our life we must trust Hashem to perceive reality

correctly. Thus assuring our survival.

4. The Limitation of the Human Mind

At the beginning of Parsha Shelach, Rashi cites Chazal's question, "Why is the portion of the meraglim (spies) juxtaposed to the portion of Miriam?" The Midrash explains that the juxtaposition teaches us, "Although these evil people (the rashaim) witnessed what had happened to Miriam they did not learn a lesson from it." Miriam had spoken out of turn about Moshe (her brother) and was punished by G-d with the affliction of leprosy (Tzaras), which caused her to be sent out of all of the camps for seven days. The "evil people" had witnessed the consequences of speaking negatively (lashon hara) yet they did not learn from this and subsequently slandered the land. The Midrash explains the reason why these people did not take heed and were oblivious to Miriam's situation was because they were "rashaim (Evil People)". Because the evil person is so desensitized he does not have the ability to comprehend the wrong in doing evil.

The Gemara tells us that the hearts of the rashaim (the evil people) are sealed over; therefore causing them to be desensitized. The Talmud tells us by quoting a verse from Prophets that the motto of Evil people is, "Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we shall die!" If one may die tomorrow and thus every moment has infinite value should one waste that moment with eating and drinking? The evil person, because of his level of insensitivity, does not understand the foolishness of his thinking. The evil people that the Midrash refers to did not learn from the incident of Miriam because their hearts were sealed and could not see things clearly. What should have these evil people learned from Miriam?

When Miriam spoke out of turn about Moshe Rabbeinu she was not questioning Moshe's behavior but rather she was questioning Moshe's decision regarding his behavior. Miriam heard from Tzipporah that Moshe had separated from her after Sinai because of his special level as a prophet. Miriam and Aaron were also prophets in their own right and they did not separate from their spouses. Although Miriam understood that Moshe (her brother) was greater than she was, she nevertheless believed that was not sufficient reason to separate from his wife. After making these remarks to her brother Aaron, Hashem summons Miriam, Aaron and Moshe to the Meeting Tent and chastises Miriam by saying - "How could you (Miriam) speak this way about Moshe My servant? Do you not realize that his level of prophecy is on another plane and therefore he is not permitted to be with his wife." The basis for Miriam's mistake was that she did not perceive Moshe properly and therefore she criticized his decision regarding his wife.

The Gemara tells us that Moshe, as an individual, was equivalent to the Sanhedrin HaGadolah (the Great High Court) which was comprised of seventy judges at the most advanced level. The word of Moshe was equivalent to the Word of Hashem. Rambam states in the Laws of Yessodei HaTorah that the basis of Torah is the word of Moshe. If Moshe separated from his wife that meant that it was Hashem's decision that he should do so. When Miriam questioned Moshe's behavior, she was in

essence questioning the authenticity and validity of the Torah itself, because Moshe is the transmitter of the Torah. If Miriam questioned the accuracy of that transmission she is in actuality questioning the validity of Torah, which is synonymous with Moshe. So in fact her criticism of Moshe was not an affront to Moshe but was an attack against the authenticity and validity of Torah. Miriam's mistake was that she did not perceive Moshe as synonymous with Hashem. As a result of this misunderstanding she spoke out of turn.

The lesson that the spies should have been learned from Miriam was that they should not rely on their own limited understanding. The basis for Miriam's mistake emanated from her limited understanding of Moshe.

Hashem told the Klal Yisroel that He is giving them the Land of Canaan that flows with milk and honey. The spies saw that the land was inhabited by giants and other unexplainable phenomena. What they saw with their own eyes and perceived to be reality was in contradiction with the Word of Hashem. How could they reconcile the two? According to their limited human capacity the two could not be reconciled. They tried to measure Hashem with their own measuring rod (the human mind).

Avraham was told that his decedents would be as numerous as the stars in the heaven, yet Hashem told him to bring his only son as an offering. How could this seeming contradiction be reconciled? Avraham understood that within the context of human intelligence it is not reconcilable. However he did understand that within the context of the Divine realm (The Mind of Hashem) there was no contradiction. Avraham did not question Hashem because he knew that within his limited human capacity he could not understand the Divine Mind. Situations may seem completely irrational and unexplainable, but this is only the case in our own limited context.

The lesson that these evil people should have learned from Miriam was that she was punished because she processed what she had witnessed with her own limited human perception and spoke out of turn against Moshe rather than understanding that one could only understand Moshe if one is privy to the Divine Mind. The spies should have understood that despite what they had seen in the land, if Hashem had said that the land is filled with goodness then this is the true reality regardless of their own perception. The human mind, because of its limitation, is not able to perceive many truths that do exist.

Many times people have questions that they cannot go beyond. They are trapped within their own limited perspective. This causes them to accept their own assumptions as reality and negate the Divine Perspective.

Now that we understand the mistake of the spies we must take heed and also learn that the world around us does not necessarily have to make sense according to our limited understanding, but rather we must understand that what does not make sense to us makes perfect sense to Hashem.

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