

A MEANINGFUL APPROACH

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Forty years of desert wanderings are coming to a close. Moshe knew that his end was near and wanted to leave the children of Israel with parting words that were filled with love, direction, guidance, and admonition.

He discussed many of the events of the past 40 years; the triumphs and tragedies. Though he did not mince words, there are many details that are added in Moshe's review that shed more light on the previously related incidents.

One story in particular is the story of the meraglim, the spies, who returned to the Jewish camp from Canaan with horrific tales and predictions of sure defeat. But it is not the end of the failed mission that I would like to focus on, rather its conception.

Moshe recounts: "You all approached me saying, 'let us send spies and they shall seek the land.'" Rashi is quick to comment on the words "all of you." "In confusion. The young pushed the old," explains Rashi, "and the older pushed ahead of the leaders!" Rashi adds that at the giving of the Torah, however, the elders and the youth came in orderly fashion to present their needs.

Two questions arise. Why does it make a difference, in the actual reporting of the spies, how the request was presented? In addition, why did Rashi deem it necessary to contrast this conduct with what occurred at the giving of the Torah?

During the first weeks of the Civil War, newspaper editorials from across the nation were filled a plethora of criticisms, advise, and second guessing of President Lincoln's handling of the crisis. Eventually, the editors asked for a meeting with the President, which he granted. During the meeting, each one of the editors interrupted the other with their ideas, suggestions, and egos.

Suddenly Mr. Lincoln stood up. "Gentleman," he exclaimed, "this discussion reminds me of the story of the traveler whose carriage wheel broke right in the middle of a thunderstorm during the black of night. The rain was pouring, the thunder was booming and the carriage was sinking as he furtively tried to fix his wagon. He groped and grappled in the wet darkness to find a solution to his problem.

"Suddenly the sky lit up with a magnificent bolt of lightning that lit the countryside like daylight. Seconds later the ground shook from a clap of thunder that reverberated for miles with a deafening boom.

"The hapless traveler looked heavenward and tearfully pleaded with his creator. 'Lord,' he begged, is

it possible to provide a little more light and a little less noise?' "

In defining the sin of the spies, Rashi notices very consequential words. "All of you converged." He explains that particular phrase by contrasting it with a scenario that occurred at Sinai. When the Jewish nation wanted to modify the manner in which the revelation transpired, the request for Moshe's intervention was done in an orderly manner.

A few years before his passing, my grandfather visited Israel and was asked to deliver a shiur (lecture) in a prominent Yeshiva on a difficult Talmudic passage.

Upon his arrival at the Yeshiva, he was shocked to see hordes of students and outsiders clamoring to get front row seats in order to hear the lecture. There was quite a bit of pushing and shoving. After all, at the time, Reb Yaakov was the oldest living Talmudic sage and this lecture was an unprecedented honor and privilege for the students and the throngs that entered the Yeshiva to get a glimpse of the Torah he was to offer. It was even difficult for him to approach the lecture, because of the chaotic disarray.

The goings on did not bear well with him. He discarded his planned lecture and instead posed the following question to the students: "In Parshas Shelach, the portion of the spies, the Torah tells us that each shevet (tribe) sent one spy. The Torah lists each spy according to his tribe. Yet, unlike ordinary enumeration of the tribes, this one is quite different. It is totally out of order. The Torah begins by listing the first four tribes in order of birth, but then jumps to Ephraim who was the youngest then to Benyamin then back to Menashe. Dan and Asher follow, with the tribes of Naftali and Gad ensuing. Many commentaries struggle to make some semblance of order out of this seeming hodgepodge of tribes. It is very strange indeed.

"But," explained Reb Yaakov as he gazed with disappointment upon the unruly crowd. "Perhaps Rashi in Devorim explains the reason for the staggered enumeration. The reason they are mentioned out of order is simply because there was no order! The young pushed the old and moved ahead to say their piece. And from that moment, the mission was doomed." Many of us have ideas and opinions. The way they are presented may have as much impact on their success as the ideas themselves.

***Dedicated by Burt Usdan and Daughters in Memory of Roslyn Usdan
Good Shabbos!***

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