

TAKEN FOR GRANTED

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Parshas Shlach marks a sad turning point for our nation. It is in this portion, that the Jews, poised to enter the land of Israel, suffer a severe setback one that would leave them meandering in a desert for forty years, only to enter it missing an entire generation of their forebears.

It all started when the Jewish nation was not confident enough in Hashem's assurance of sweeping victory in their conquest of Canaan. In order to add a human dimension to what should have been a Divinely directed cakewalk, they decided to see whether they could conquer the land by themselves. So they sent spies. Barring Yehoshua and Calev, the spies returned with horrific tales of unconquerable giants and impregnable cities. The sordid tales brought a cloud of despair upon the people. Hashem responded to their fears saying, in turn, if you don't think you can go in, then you won't go in. All the sinful spies and those who cried with them remained doomed to the sands of Sinai while the next generation, their children under the age of twenty entered Eretz Yisrael.

But a look at the original charge may help us understand why the mission was doomed from the onset. Despite his misgivings, Moshe instructs the spies to "See the Land -- how is it? And the people that dwells in it -- is it strong or weak? Is it few or numerous? And how is the Land in which it dwells - - is it good or is it bad? And how are the cities in which it dwells -- are they open or are they fortified? And how is the land -- is it fertile or is it lean? Are there trees in it or not? You shall strengthen yourselves and take from the fruit of the Land." (Numbers 13:18-20).

Moshe tells them to do some daring acts, check the fortified cities, examine the strengths of the people and find out about the strategic location of their encampments and try to find out their strengths and weaknesses. Yet Moshe never tells them to strengthen themselves upon executing any part of their mission, except when it comes to picking fruit!

Why would picking fruit, require strengthening of either body or faith? Shouldn't going into a Canaanite vineyard and plucking a sample cluster be the easiest part of the mission? Why is that the only time that Moshe encourages them to strengthen their resolve and "take a fruit"? Ramban and Siforno seem to approach this question with a practical approach, but I would like to take a homiletic one.

The classic compendiums of Jewish humor contain the story of an elderly Jewish man who sees an ad for a \$20 cruise to Miami Beach.

The minute he boards the ship, he is strapped to a chair along with one hundred other saps and

handed a pair of oars. All of a sudden a giant of a man, whip in hand, enters the galley. He begins screaming at them to begin rowing. He walks up and down the aisle and the moment anyone stops rowing and cracks his whip across their back!

After two weeks, they finally reach Miami Beach. The old man has lost fifteen pounds and is about to collapse. But now the journey is over and the vicious taskmaster says they can go.

But before he departs the old man whispers to the man next to him, "You know I've never been on one of these cruises before. How much do we tip the whipper?"

In charging the spies to take something back from the land, Moshe Rabbeinu points to the weak nature of the personalities that doomed the spies from the onset of their mission. If the spies really felt that Canaan was their land, they would have needed no coaxing to take its fruit! After all, it was "their" fruit on "their" land!!

Unfortunately they did not feel that way. Unless strongly prodded they would not take fruit from the land that Hashem promised was theirs. They needed to be told "Strengthen yourself and take a fruit!" You see they did not feel it was theirs to take. They were hesitant. They were scared. It is that same insecurity that makes modern day Jews dismiss Jerusalem as their capital or readily relinquish their cherished holy places. To insecure guilt-ridden Jews, even taking a cluster of grapes from the land that was actually theirs was to them an exercise in pilfering. Perhaps, had the spies gone in with confidence, as if the land was theirs, its fruit theirs and its inhabitants theirs to inherit, they would have come back with a positive feeling and a victorious attitude. But their guilt, lack of enthusiasm and a feeling of subservience to the Canaanites, rendered them hopeless. They could not carry home the pride in the land that would be theirs. Because with the burden of improper guilt, even a cluster of grapes is a heavy load to carry home. Good Shabbos ©2000 Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

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