JEWISH GUILT

by Rabbi Dovid Green

Jewish guilt is a popular topic. It seems that Jews are always finding something to feel guilty about. Those who talk about Jewish guilt like to blame Jewish mothers for its continuity. Guilt in general has gotten a bad rap in our generation. Perhaps even one which is undeserved. This weeks parsha can help us understand something about the Torah attitude toward guilt. Maybe after reading this we will learn to have a new appreciation for Jewish mothers.

Our parsha begins with Moshe sending twelve scouts into The Land of Canaan. Ten of the scouts return with a report strongly discouraging the Jewish nation from attempting to conquer the inhabitants of the land. Two scouts, Yehoshuah and Calev, asserted that they should indeed proceed as planned.

Rashi, (Medieval France), tells us that when the scouts left on their forty-day journey, they were all upright men - and even leaders of their tribes. By the time they returned, the ten were prepared, and indeed perpetrated an evil which we are still shedding tears over.

What made those men act in such a way? The Chofetz Chaim, (d. 1933), explains that the following was the disagreement between the ten scouts and the other two scouts. The ten scouts maintained that the Children of Israel were not worthy of G-d's divine assistance. Their past record was tarnished through various transgressions, and G-d would not aid them in conquering the nations of The Land of Canaan. They argued that The Land of Canaan was a place in which G-d demands perfection. The Jews would never be able to deliver the behavior expected of them, and they would fall prey to the nations protecting their homeland. "...that night the people wept" (Numbers 14:1). Jewish guilt.

Calev, who understood G-d's ways appealed to the Jewish nation saying "The land...is a very very good land. He can give it to us...just don't _REBEL_ against G-d...G-d is with us, so don't be afraid" (Numbers 14:8-9).

The Chofetz Chaim explains that G-d understands we are human with all of our frailties. Of course G-d has expectations of us. Of course He expects us to learn what His will is and follow it. That, however, does not preclude our being imperfect. We are not expected to be angels. G-d has plenty of angels who can fill that role. Calev spells it out for us. "Just don't rebel!" That is the criterion for favor from G-d. Try your best, and don't rebel.

What about wrongdoing? What about a tarnished record? For that G-d created "Teshuvah." Briefly, "Teshuvah" is the mechanism by which we recognize our regrettable actions, and do our best to

make improvements. Having done a sincere "Teshuvah," we return to our original closeness to G-d, and we need no longer fear for G-d's anger.

Back to guilt. Dr. Abraham J. Twersky writes in "Let Us Make Man" that guilt is to the emotions what pain is to the physical body. Physical pain is very useful and beneficial. Without pain we would not know that we have touched a flame, or dropped something heavy on our foot, etc. Pain alerts us to stop whatever it is that we are doing which is inflicting damage on us. When a person is whole emotionally, doing things which we know are wrong causes us guilt. The pain we call guilt lets us know that there is something we ought to stop doing. There is guilt which is founded in morals and conscience. That is healthy guilt. Guilt which lacks a foundation is not healthy and needs to be dealt with.

The ten scouts were suffering from fear over their imperfections. Calev teaches us that it was unfounded. In our own personal journey up the ladder of spirituality we encounter obstacles. We should not allow guilt to affect our resolve. We should allow Calev's words to echo in our minds. "Just don't rebel." We are deserving, we are loved, and we are favored, as long as we "just don't rebel."

Good Shabbos!