

THE SOUNDNESS OF SILENCE

by Rabbi Label Lam

They reported to him and said, "We arrived at the Land to which you sent us, and it indeed flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. But- the people that dwells in the Land is powerful, the cities are fortified and very great and we saw there offspring of the giant..." (Bamidbar 13:27-28)

What had the spies done so awfully wrong that the Nation of Israel was denied entry to the Holy land for forty years? A great deal of ink has been used trying to explain their tragic flaw and unconscious motives, but it may really boil down to one word. Which word might that be?

Years ago I had the honor and privilege to hear the following story from Rabbi Shimshon Pincus ztl. He told us about a fine young man that had earned a marvelous shidduch -marriage match with a prominent family. This young man was an only child born to his parents after twenty-four years of marriage. Rabbi Pincus ztl. had asked the father if he had any sense of why they merited to have a child that year. Had there been any unusual incident? This was his story:

After twenty three years of childless marriage and approaching the edge of despair the husband did what amounts to an act of desperation. He had heard that on the other side of Jerusalem there was a small Chassidic Synagogue that held out a special promise. Anyone who would attain for himself on the holy day of Yom Kippur the honor of Maftir Yonah their request would most certainly be answered in the affirmative. So with not much more than that hope he uprooted himself from his usual place in the Yeshiva where he had a seat of honor, and traveled to unfamiliar territory where he would be a stranger on a back bench. He arrived early enough on the eve of Yom Kippur and arranged with the one in charge and secured for himself for a hefty price the coveted Maftir Yonah.

After Kol Nidre and all the evening prayers while exiting the synagogue he noticed another young man like himself also not dressed like a Chassid seeming slightly out of place. He approached and asked him why he was praying here in this particular "Shteibl" for Yom Kippur. The young fellow told his tearful tale that he and his wife had been married for almost three years and they had not yet been blessed with children. He had heard that whoever would attain Maftir Yonah in this Synagogue would be granted their heart's desire and he hoped to put in a modest bid for Maftir Yonah the next day.

The man just listened with astonishment. He could have slammed him with the sad news that he had already locked up the important honor for himself and made a good case why he was more needy and deserving but he rather said nothing. He just picked himself up and left returning to his place on

the other side of Jerusalem. That year his wife was expecting and she gave birth to their child. He felt that his deepest wish was granted that year not because he got Maftir Yonah but rather because he didn't say a word and he let someone else have it instead.

Sure the spies had all kinds of hidden reasons and agendas but none of that became relevant or was actually punishable until they spoke out what should not have been said. If they would have remained disciplined in their speech, then no harm would have been done, but when they said the word "but" their world began to unravel. Whenever I get an invitation to speak I have a strong sense that the host is less concerned that I know what to talk about and more worried that as a speaker I should not say something offensive or inappropriate. If only the spies could have held back, and not said that one extra word, who knows what blessings may then have flowed like milk and honey in the merit of the soundness of silence. DvarTorah, Copyright © 2007 by Rabbi Label Lam and Torah.org.