

CONSTANTLY CHALLENGED

by Rabbi Pinchas Avruch

This week's portion is the first from the book of Devarim, or Deuteronomy. The dictionary definition of Deuteronomy is "fifth book of the [Bible], derived from the Greek words deuterios ("second") and nomos ("law")...it is a repetition of previous laws with an urgent appeal to obey them. Jews use the first word or first significant word of the text of each of the first five books of the Bible, or Pentateuch, as titles. Thus Deuteronomy is known in Hebrew as Devarim ("words")."

It is no coincidence that the Rabbis aligned the calendar so that this portion is read this week. Before the repetition of the laws commenced, Moshe recounted the events that brought them to where they were on that day - the first of Shevat of the fortieth year since they left Egypt. The pivotal event that caused the trek to be one of forty years was the national tolerance of and concurrence with the slanderous report of the spies. "But you did not wish to ascend, and you rebelled against the word of Hashem, your G-d. You slandered in your tents and said, 'Because of Hashem's hatred for us did he take us out of the land of Egypt to deliver us into the hand of the Amorite to destroy us...'" (1:26-27) So convinced were the entire Jewish people that their entry to the Holy Land was doomed that they spent the entire night weeping for their loss. For their acceptance of the report they were punished with forty years in the wilderness; but for their reaction, the Talmud in Tractate Ta'anis (which deals with the Jewish fasts)(29a) relates that Hashem responded, "You cried [this time] in vain; I will give you reason to cry through the generations." The night of this cry, the ninth of Av, would be the night that both Batei HaMikdash (Holy Temples, in Jerusalem) would be destroyed, that the revolt at Betar would be quashed, that the Temple Mount would be plowed over, that the Expulsion of Spanish Jewry following the Inquisition would occur. It would become a night that would be soaked in Jewish blood and Jewish tears.

And it was so avoidable. Inasmuch as the spies believed their motives were pure and noble, Moshe, Yehoshua (Joshua) and Calev knew that it was a mission fraught with spiritual dangers. Moshe added the letter "yud", a portion of Hashem's name, to Yehoshua's name, changing it from Hoshea, as a source of blessing and divine assistance. Calev went to Chevron, to Me'aras HaMachpailah (the Cave of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs) to pray to Hashem that He grant him divine assistance in this mission. We know the spies were of the greatest Torah scholars of their time, pious devout people. Why did they not take the same precautions?

Michtav Me'Eliyahu (collected writings and discourses of Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler (1891-1954) of London and B'nai Brak, one of the outstanding personalities and thinkers of the Mussar movement)

explains that the yetzer hara (internal desire to act contrary to G-d's will; in many experiences it is the side of the internal tug-of-war that pulls us to do what we know we should not) never gives up on his mission. When someone is well fortified in his dedication to the Divine Will, the yetzer hara feeds the feeling of accomplishment specifically to encourage the person to let his guard down, thus opening an opportunity for the yetzer hara to find success. This complacency is a key weapon of the yetzer.

This, continues Rabbi Dessler, was the error of ten spies. They assumed that because they were literally putting their lives at risk for the benefit of the Jewish people that this alone would arouse Hashem's mercy to protect them from the yetzer hara and his deceptions. In fact, this complacency was the root cause of their demise. Rabbi Dessler contrasts the spies to our patriarch Yitzchak (Isaac) at the time his father, Avraham, was tested with the charge of sacrificing his son. As they approached Mount Moriah (future home of the Bais HaMikdash), they got off their donkeys and carried their supplies, with Avraham placing the wood on Yitzchak's back. How could Avraham, the paradigm of chessed (acts of loving kindness), in the last moments before he would offer his beloved son, use him as a common wood carrier? Because even by adding to this most awesome trial some small additional element of challenge, Yitzchak maintained the intensity of his battle with his yetzer hara, not only assuring the success in the greater test, but more so, teaching Yitzchak one never "graduates" in the realm of spiritual growth.

Have a good Shabbos!

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