

# FISH N' CHIPS OR NEW FRONTIERS

*by Rabbi Naftali Reich*

In this week's portion we find Moshe Rabeinu dispatched the 12 spies to prepare for the people's successful entry into the promised land. Rather than returning with an upbeat report, they instilled a chilling fear into the people's minds and hearts causing them to doubt whether Hashem would continue the miraculous chain of events that had been initiated with their exodus from Egypt.

The commentaries touch upon the underlying motives behind the spies' slanderous report. Surely these men of great spiritual stature grasped that nothing was outside the realm of possibility. After all, they were living in Hashem's world. The people were being led through the wilderness by a heavenly cloud that traveled before them flattening the mountains that stood in their way! The entire generation saw Divine revelation in every aspect of their daily lives. They were eating heavenly Manna and being sustained from water that flowed out of a simple rock.

The midrash tells us that the spies deeply desired that the people should be able to stay in the wilderness rather than have to engage the necessary challenges that would confront them when they entered the land of Israel. In the wilderness they were living in the sheltered and secure comfort of the Divine embrace. In the wilderness the spies all had comfortable positions of leadership that they would have to relinquish once the people entered the land. They had a vested interest in staying put and thus their ability to evaluate the objectivity of their report and evaluation was inevitably tarnished.

I recall as a young boy growing up in Manchester, England, I was always somewhat peeved by some aspects of British society. I could never put my finger on what irked me or what pulled me to the other side of the Atlantic. England had been a safe haven for Jews since the 17th century. My family had lived there since the turn of the century and had prospered without having to compromise their religious values. Although the English are famous for their stiff upper lip they are also fair minded, genteel and correct! The food may not have been on par with French cuisine but I never felt deprived with a good plate of fish and chips and a cup of English tea. Yet something bothered me. I finally identified the source of my discomfort. England was a country that was deeply invested in its cultural roots and way of life. The predominant mindset was one that was mired in the past. The lower 'slum' class were locked in a frame of mind that didn't allow them to break out and improve their standard of living. As long as the corner pub and betting parlor that they patronized were present they felt no need for change. America, on the other hand, was invested with a pioneering spirit. It was a land of opportunity in which even the lower rungs of society aspired to live the

American dream. Its mindset was fertile and open to change. It was here that I felt I could step out of my own self imposed limitations, impact others and make a difference!

The mindset of our host country has a profound influence on molding the attitudes and mentality that form the template of our spiritual growth. True, as religious Jews we are deeply committed to maintaining, with filial devotion an uncompromising commitment to our spiritual heritage. We are not willing to concede even a jot from the values and traditions that we cherish. But at the same time we are in growth mode and never satisfied with the way we were yesterday. We must always be open to change and not afraid to embrace new charges of responsibility. We must constantly press on to secure for ourselves a better spiritual tomorrow.

This fine balance of cherishing what was while boldly moving forward was somewhat missed by the meraglim. The word "meraglim" is rooted in the word "hergel" meaning accustomed and habitual connoting their character flaw. They tenaciously clung to the past. It was comfortable in the wilderness, they reasoned, why change? Yet the path of progress requires a bolder approach. In our own lives let us bravely and courageously move forward while traversing the wilderness that represents our own life's terrain. If we remain undaunted by the challenges that we will confront, we too will surely merit to feel Hashem's loving hand guiding and sustaining us. Together, may we speedily enter our promised land and greet in unison Moshiach tzidkeinu.

Sincerely,

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