

# ONE STEP AT A TIME

*by Rabbi Yaakov Menken*

*"And Calev quieted the people towards Moshe, and he said, 'let us surely go up and inherit it, for we can certainly overcome it.'" [13:30]*

The spies returned from their tour of the Land of Israel, and ten of them delivered a negative report - saying that the nation would not be able to go in and conquer the inhabitants. Only Calev and Yehoshua returned with encouraging reports.

Rashi, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, quotes from the Talmud [Sotah 35a] which says that Calev yelled out, "is this the only thing which [Moshe] the son of Amram did to us?" Since Calev started by sounding as if he intended to criticize, and the people had turned against Moshe, they quieted down to hear what he would add.

Calev then said: "he took us out of Egypt, and he parted the Sea of Reeds for us, and brought the Manna down to us..." Moshe was G-d's agent, and many life-saving miracles had already happened for the Jewish people through him. "Let us surely go up," said Calev, meaning anywhere Moshe tells us to go. Or, as the Talmud puts it, Calev was saying, "if he tells us to build ladders and ascend to Heaven, shouldn't we listen to him?"

Studying the story of the spies and their rebellion, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein teaches two profound lessons in the nature of spiritual growth, regarding how we must act if we hope to grow.

He asks: why did the Talmud need to refer to ladders? Why not simply say "ascend to Heaven?" His answer is that when we are looking to climb spiritual heights, we need to do our part. We must do everything humanly possible to get there -- only then can we rely upon G-d to help us and to take us the rest of the way. We cannot simply sit back and expect HaShem to send down a golden escalator -- we have to first build a ladder and start moving.

Reb Moshe then asks a second question: how is it conceivable that the generation of the desert, which witnessed countless miracles, could even contemplate a rebellion like this? They were called the "Dor De'ah," the Generation of Knowledge. "What a maidservant saw by the Sea, even the prophet Yechezkel didn't see." How could they fall so far, so soon thereafter?

Here again, the concept of a ladder comes into play. One cannot spontaneously attain the pinnacle of spirituality, maximal closeness to HaShem. We don't take "leaps of faith" in Judaism. Hasty leaps can be easily erased by equally hasty reversals. Buildings which last for years are built upon solid

foundations.

The Jews in Egypt were thoroughly immersed in a hedonistic and immoral society, and had gone through "49 Gates of Impurity." Suddenly they were pulled out, and 50 days later they were through the "50 Gates of Holiness," speaking with G-d Himself.

As great and profound an experience as this was, it nonetheless did not instantly transform all the People of Israel into walking angels. Reb Moshe says that in such a short span of time, the Children of Israel were not able to internalize all that they had seen and experienced. They did not understand that if G-d promised to lead them to the Land of Israel, then obviously He would also provide them with all the necessary means to get there and to occupy the Land. Their experiences came as such a shock, such a jolt, that it took them quite a while to change their way of thinking.

It is the slow steps up the ladder which make the difference. When we experience something profound and inspirational, something uplifting -- then we need to go to work building a foundation beneath it. We need to ensure that the rungs we just skipped are strong enough to support us as we continue to climb.

We must do our part -- we must work in order to grow. We cannot expect HaShem to simply pull us up with a spontaneous and blinding light. On the contrary, it is steady and measured steps which will carry us safely up the ladder, to spiritual heights which we do not yet realize we can attain.

Good Shabbos,  
Rabbi Yaakov Menken

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