

LAND OF SPARKLING STONES

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Why does the chapter of the spies follow immediately after the incident of Miriam's criticism of Moshe and her punishment? After having seen how Miriam had been stricken [with tzaraas (leprosy)] because of her slander, the spies should have appreciated the gravity of malicious gossip. But the wicked spies did not learn their lesson - and were not deterred from slandering the Land. [Rashi]

With the advent of jet airplanes and overseas travel, we can, at a whim, hop on a plane and spend a few days in Eretz Yisrael [the Land of Israel]. It wasn't always so easy. In earlier times, travelling to Israel involved a long, arduous, and sometimes dangerous journey over land and water. In fact, to "visit" Israel at all was quite uncommon. Most people who undertook the journey did so to move there permanently. To go there for a week or ten days was unheard of.

Today, we are blessed to have such ready accessibility to our Holy Land. Sometimes, though, this blessing can be a two-edged sword. The easier it becomes to visit Israel, the more commonplace and ho-hum it becomes. Travelling to the Holy Land, which had once been seen as a holy pilgrimage and a spiritually uplifting mission which could change one's life forever, is now weighed by potential vacationers against a trip to Florida or summer camp for the kids - "What should we do this year..." The more difficult something is, the more commitment and resolution it requires, the more meaningful it becomes. We have to be careful that in today's global, travel-happy society, we do not lose sight of our Holy Land and its significance.

Rabbi Chaim of Tzernowitz z"l, author of Be'er Mayim Chaim and other sefarim always dreamed of moving to Eretz Yisrael.

A meshulach is an emissary who travels to the Diaspora to collect funds for the poor of Israel. In earlier times, every two years or so the Jewish community of Israel would select a representative to come and gather financial support. This meshulach would be from the elite scholars and pious individuals of the community - someone worthy of representing such a special cause.

Once, a meshulach arrived in the town of Tzernowitz and began collecting funds. Eventually, he came to the house of R' Chaim, where he was asked in and offered a drink and some refreshments. From his demeanour, it was obvious that he was a very special and devout individual. R' Chaim sat him down and eagerly began questioning him about Israel: What was it like? How was it living there? Do you still feel its sanctity, even though you live there?

"I will tell you this," said the meshulach, "the Land of Israel is so holy that even its stones sparkle with kedushah (sanctity)." R' Chaim responded that he probably meant this figuratively - a metaphor of the Land's holiness. "No, Reb Chaim," he insisted, "I mean this quite literally. As I said, the very stones of Israel sparkle with kedushah!"

This was all R' Chaim needed to hear. Despite his wife's most ardent appeals, he decided that the time had come for them to finally move to Israel - to the land where "the very stones gleamed with kedushah!"

After months of preparation and planning, they said their goodbyes and left Tzernowitz forever. After a long and difficult journey, their ship finally docked in the Holy Land. They disembarked. But R' Chaim, who should have been elated, seemed distressed. He had seen the stones. "I don't understand," he said to his wife, "these are just regular stones. They are no different from the stones back home in Tzernowitz! That meshulach lied to me!"

R' Chaim was devastated. The meshulach had promised him that the stones of Israel - literally - sparkled with kedushah. How could he have lied so blatantly! As much as he tried, R' Chaim could not find room in his heart to forgive the man for having fooled him.

Not too long afterwards, R' Chaim came across the meshulach. "Shalom Aleichem, R' Chaim," the man greeted him. "I see you finally decided to come and live with us in the Holy Land."

"Aleichem Shalom," R' Chaim responded. Then he said, "Reb Yid, I'm having a hard time being mochel (forgiving) you. You lied to me. You promised me that the stones of Israel literally sparkle with kedushah. I do not contest that Israel is a very holy land, but I have yet to see even a single stone sparkle! How could you deceive me?"

"R' Chaim," he answered calmly, "I told no lie. As I said then, so I will repeat to you now. The stones of Israel sparkle with kedushah. One must, however, be worthy of seeing this with his own eyes." Though not completely satisfied with this answer, R' Chaim did not pursue the argument any further.

One day, after having lived in Israel for about half a year, R' Chaim saw it. He couldn't believe it. His eyes had been opened. The stones were sparkling with kedushah, just as the man had told him. R' Chaim was so moved by this that he was inspired to write a sefer, which he named Shaar Ha-tefilah (The Gate of Prayer), in gratitude of having been worthy to perceive the true kedushah of Eretz Yisrael. One who learns his sefarim can see how ahavas Eretz Yisrael (love of the Land of Israel) permeated his very being.

We are not used to the concept of lashon hara (malicious slander) applying to inanimate objects. We all know that it is forbidden to gossip and speak maliciously about other people, but also about other things? Evidently, the kedushah of the Land of Israel is such that even to speak critically about it is immoral.

Once, Rabbi Yechezkel Halberstam z"l, known to all as the Shinover Rav, visited Eretz Yisrael. While

there, he travelled the length and breadth of the Land, and took in all its beauty. He saw the many pious Jews who lived there in sub-poverty conditions, and the great Torah scholars and Rebbes. He saw the wholesomeness and purity of the communities, and beheld their great commitment and mesirus nefesh (sacrifice) for Torah and mitzvos. Evidently, he also saw some things which weren't so pleasing. Perhaps he saw some families falling apart, unable to function under the difficult circumstances. Maybe he witnessed some conflict between different religious sects. Overall though, he was highly impressed.

Before leaving the Holy Land, he went to visit the tzaddik Rabbi David of Lelov to ask for a blessing for his difficult journey back home. R' David presented him with a gift - a silver kiddush cup. "This cup," he said, "is to remind you not to be 'among those who spread slander about the Land' [mi-motzi'ei dibas ha-aretz ra'ah] (14:37). There is so much good to speak about Eretz Yisrael - make sure you don't focus on the negative."

Nowadays, it is too easy to fall into the trap of being "among those who spread slander about the Land". We must remember and be aware of the great kedushah that Eretz Yisrael carries - and treat it with respect and awe. And may we all merit to behold the sparkle of its stones!

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